

A dress for Sister Thea

By **Carole Norris Greene** Catholic News Service

This column is part of the CNS columns package.

It was one of the most beautiful dresses I had ever seen -- a two-piece wraparound African garb of ankle length, teal in color and trimmed in a shiny white thread around the modest v-neck, hem and billowy sleeves. The teal was overlaid with a white floral pattern.

I saw the dress in a gift shop in Nairobi, Kenya, where I was attending the 43rd International Eucharistic Congress in 1985. It was the first time an International Eucharistic Congress was held on the African continent, and many of us active in black Catholic ministry in the United States flocked there to be a part of that historic moment.

After buying the dress, however, I had second thoughts about keeping it, for it was not my thing to frequently wear African garbs. But when I envisioned Sister Thea Bowman in it, I knew it belonged only to her.

Sister Thea, who died 20 years ago, was a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration and a native of Canton, Miss. Her trademark was long-and-flowing African dresses. As a consultant for intercultural awareness for the Diocese of Jackson, Miss., Sister Thea traveled the world, using her magnificent voice in song, prayer and storytelling to break down cultural barriers.



Sister Thea Bowman, Washington DC,
White House Cancer Courage award, March 1988

Sister Thea was to come to Brooklyn in 1986 for the annual Praise Him! liturgy workshop co-sponsored by the arch/diocesan offices for black Catholic ministry in Brooklyn (which I headed), New York City and Rockville Centre. I planned to give the dress to her then -- if I could part with it!

Then I recalled what Pope John Paul II said at the eucharistic congress's concluding Mass: "Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." The pope was talking about Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross. But the principle holds true for anyone who elects to die to self for the benefit of another.

So I gladly gave the outfit to Sister Thea when she arrived in New York for the liturgy workshop. The

bone cancer that would take her life four years later was detected only two years earlier in 1984, but she masked her suffering well.

And being her usual insightful self, I think Sister Thea sensed that it took some resolve for me to part with that dress.

I say this because periodically she'd drop me notes mentioning the dress.

At the end of a general letter dated Jan. 1, 1988, she added this handwritten

"P.S.: My dress has been to Omaha, Flint, Baton Rouge, Chicago, Louisville, Harlem and the Virgin Islands. Everywhere it is admired, and everywhere I tell its story. My prayers are with you and your friend (now my husband Andre), with you and all you love. Your sister, T."

At the end of another letter dated June 5, 1988, she wrote:

"P.S. The Norris dress has become my favorite and my most special. Every time I wear it I pray for you. T."

She also sent a copy of a photo of her taken by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She was speaking at a celebration of the birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Milwaukee. A gigantic portrait of King was in the background.

On the photocopy she wrote only:

"Your dress."

Weeks after Sister Thea's funeral in April of 1990, a box arrived at my home in Baltimore from Sister Thea's beloved friend, Franciscan Sister Dorothy Kundering, and in it was Thea's dress! The accompanying note said:

"Carole, ... Thea has in writing that you are to get this back. She truly looked beautiful in it. Dort."

The dress hangs in my closet today, more treasured now than ever before. And if it survives the passage of time better than I will, I will request to be buried in it.

END

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Carole Greene, purchaser of the dress

See *Sister Thea Bowman Shooting Star* c.1993, 1999. edited by Celestine Cepress, FSPA, for black and white photos of Thea in Carole's dress. p. 39, p. 41. Also in *Thea's Song*, c. 2009, Orbis Books, by Charlene Smith and John Feister. p. 211.