

The sister who preached 'true truths'

20 years after her death, Thea Bowman remembered for bridging divisions

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By [Tom Roberts](#)



Sr. Thea Bowman, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration is pictured in an undated photo.

(CNS/Michael Hoyt)

The new biography *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* contains a scene in which Jesuit Fr. Joseph Brown first spots “this strange-looking woman” making her way along the edge of a reception for black Catholic leaders during a winter meeting in Chicago.

“A tall, dark-skinned person,” he wrote in a later book about the then-famous sister, she “was carrying two shopping bags and had an intense gaze that seemed more disturbing than inviting.”

A short time later in a chapel, just as things were quieting down, Brown heard “a raw moaning” coming from behind and turned to see the same strange woman “rocking from side to side and uttering a truly unsettling” sound. “I asked one of my friends, ‘Who is that woman? She’s dressed like a bag lady off the streets, and she looks half crazy to me.’”

A priest friend marveled that Brown didn’t know the stranger and whispered, “I thought everybody in the world knew Thea by now. People either love her or loathe her.”

Wrote Brown, “I decided it was altogether easier to love her. So I do.”

It is difficult to spot anywhere in the literature any “loathing” toward Thea, but that certainly could have been the case, loathing of a quiet sort, among some who came into contact with her preaching of what she termed “true truths,” particularly about race and culture.

Brown’s depiction of her, however, takes on added meaning in the short sweep of a life that was simultaneously fiercely independent and given over increasingly to service that continued through an extended battle with a killer disease.

Thea Bowman, originally named Bertha, was the child of a line of educated African Americans, teachers and businessmen. Her mother taught school and her father, originally from Memphis, was a physician who settled in Canton, Miss., after studies in New York, because Canton lacked black doctors. A great-grandfather was a slave. She was a childhood convert to Catholicism (her parents would follow her into the church) and a lone black woman among the white members of her order, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She was a child of the Deep South who spent her teenage and young adult years in the cold and snow of La Crosse, Wis.



Redemptorist Fr. Maurice Nutt delivers the homily during a special Mass at the gravesite of Sr. Thea Bowman March 30 at Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis, Tenn.

(CNS/St. Anthony Messenger/John Feister)

As Catholics go, she might have had reason in her time to be among the angriest, given the reality of blatant racism and segregation not only in the wider society but within the church as well. Yet she became a symbol of unity. “She was a witness for intercultural

awareness, as she called it,” said John Feister, coauthor of the biography with Sr. Charlene Smith and general editor of periodicals for St. Anthony Messenger Press. The book project originated with Smith, who met Thea in 1954, when they were both beginning religious life.

Thea had what Feister called “a vision of the church made up of many people of different backgrounds, all together, and she somehow bridged across all the divisions.”

Hers is not, however, a story of sweet acquiescence to some holy card notion of what it means to be religious. From the start, as the biography demonstrates, there was a hard-edged pragmatism to Thea’s religious journey, a journey that culminated in a remarkable speech delivered to the assembled bishops of the United States during their spring meeting in 1989.

In that meeting, speaking on stage from a wheelchair just months before she died, she began by asking the bishops: “What does it mean to be black in the church and society?”

Her answer was a piercing rendition of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

“Can you hear me church? Will you help me church? ... I’m a long way from home, a long way from my home.”

“What does it mean to be black and Catholic?” she repeated, in what evolved into a stirring sermon to the church’s leadership.

“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.”

When she finished, after about a half hour, she was wheeled out along a wall of the auditorium, and the bishops moved from their seats and lined up along the wall. They waited for her, some kneeling at her wheelchair, many embracing her. It was Thea at her most powerful, preaching to the nation’s bishops in a way they rarely, if ever, had been addressed.

Thea's conversion, she wrote in a later article for religious educators, resulted from her personal experience of the sisters -- members of the order she eventually joined -- who had come to Mississippi to teach.

While much has been written about Thea, her legacy is built on her work as a preacher and singer. She left behind more memories and impressions than written words. She dazzled convinced and unconvinced alike; church folks as well as the likes of Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes." She had an eloquence that came of both physical beauty and an intelligence shaped in a household where "education was a top priority in my family on both sides." She could disclaim with a sophistication commensurate with her master's and doctoral studies on the work of St. Thomas More and her deep scholarship into the work of Southern author William Faulkner. She could seamlessly slip from the eloquence of the academy to the dialects and cadences of black America, punctuating along the way with song, effortlessly and powerfully performed.

Thea died just over 20 years ago on March 30 at age 52. On that day this year, about 50 people gathered at her grave, near those of her parents, in Memphis. It's an observance kept annually by Fr. Maurice Nutt, pastor of nearby Holy Names Church and editor of the recent *Thea Bowman: In My Own Words* (Liguori, 2009). The annual memorial service is something he said he'll do "as long as I'm here."

Among those present this year were Feister and Smith, whose book for Orbis Press draws together not only the chronology of Thea's life, but most valuably, a healthy sampling of the written record not available elsewhere. That record was preserved for years by Smith as coordinator of the Thea Bowman Legacy and executive editor of *Thea News*. She is retired but continues to serve on the board of the Thea Bowman Black Catholic Education Foundation.

Thea's long-term friend, fellow Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, and caregiver during Thea's illness, Sr. Dorothy Ann Kundinger, brought to the service the vigil candle that burned as Thea lay dying and a bit of kente cloth that belonged to her. The altar was a rough-hewn stone memorial, close to Thea's grave, for the thousands of unknown dead slaves across the South.

[What a powerful testimony of](#)

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Jun. 10, 2010.

What a powerful testimony of following Jesus that Thea Bowman gave with her life. The bishops were moved by her powerful sermon, enough so that they lined up to show her respect for speaking to them in a way that they rarely experienced by speaking her "true truths." Sadly, we have made little progress on racial issues since then. It is one thing to honor the messenger and the message, but that message must go forward in action. We have all failed in moving forward in embracing her message as racism still has a powerful hold on this nation, perhaps not as overt as in the past but just as powerfully in the insidious covert ways that racism still is present. We each must convert the message into action, but it would certainly be helpful to have our shepherds by our side for additional support and encouragement.

What a beautiful, strong,

Submitted by Patrick Peter (not verified) on Jun. 10, 2010.

What a beautiful, strong, powerful empowering woman. God Bless her for the service, and hearts she touched and lighted path she left for Catholics. She brought me back to the Catholic church over 20 years ago, now I want to find the nearest exit from all the ugly politics of tired old men who don't seem to care about empowering and lifting up the people, only oppressing them, and shroud them self in total secrecy. Jesus we need your help, there is Evil running amuck, and the flock deserve better honest caring leadership.