

On A Journey Together



Living In Christ

**Preparing to Celebrate Our
100th Anniversary**

A Process of Evangelization and Renewal
In the Diocese of Des Moines

Sister Thea Bowman

"Thea Bowman, minister of Gospel equality for all, exemplified what it means to joyously celebrate the love of God while teaching the Gospel of justice," wrote Edward Gabriele. In another tribute she is described as "a minister of joy." Sister Thea lived her vocation with an overwhelming joy that



showed most brightly through her pursuit of racial equality, in inviting the church to receive the gift of African American culture, and in her struggle with the terminal bone cancer that took her life at the age of 52.

Born in 1937 in Yazoo City, Mississippi, Thea Bowman was the granddaughter of a slave. Her father was a physician and her mother a teacher. She was raised a Methodist and at the age of 12, influenced by the Sisters who taught her, she decided to become a Catholic. Later she became the first African American woman to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at Rose Convent in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Sister Thea was blessed with a great mind, a warm personality, the gifts of dance, poetry, and song, and an evangelistic spirit. She was a lover and teacher of children in small rural areas in the North and South where she grew up. Sister Thea went on to receive a Ph.D. in English and literature, and in 1989 was the first black woman to receive a Doctor of Religion from Boston College.

From 1978 to 1988 she served as the first consultant for intercultural awareness for the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi. Sister Thea traveled vigorously sharing creative, artistic, dynamic presentations with children, youth, adults, priests, religious, bishops, even appearing on "60 Minutes." At these lively gatherings she told stories of African American elders, invited people to sing and dance celebrating the Gospel message, and led prayer. Her Gospel preaching would rouse audiences to proclaim great "Amens!"

Sister Thea believed in changing structures from within and was determined to spread the message that all cultures hold tremendous gifts to make the church whole—that cross-cultural collaboration enriches education and living.

In 1984 she became very ill with bone cancer but refused to give up sharing a Gospel message of joy, speaking from a wheelchair. She said that her culture taught her to live until she died. She died in 1990 at the age of 52. When a priest asked her what he should say in her funeral homily, Sister Thea said, "Tell them what Sojourner Truth said: 'I'm not going to die. I'm going home like a shooting star.'"

Sister Thea Bowman practiced a spirit of poverty by renouncing material things but also through a spirit of total dependence on God. She expressed this surrender to God through simple words that stirred large groups to praise and worship. She practiced a spirit of

celibacy and gave her energies totally to practicing the constitutions and mission of her community and inviting others to love God and neighbor. She practiced obedience by responding to her community's admonition to share her gifts to make the world a more compassionate place. Her work was also inspired and sustained through her order's dedication to the Eucharist an perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration's Constitutions read, "As women of the Church, we are called to become a special source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world and to contribute in a distinctive way to the Kingdom of God."

"Unity in Diversity," #8, FSPA Constitutions

"We are ecclesial women whose mission is that of the church, We are sent as Jesus was sent to manifest God's love in the world; to bring new life, meaning, and hope to a suffering and searching humanity; to heal with compassion and forgiveness; to proclaim the Gospel in word and action."

"Unity in Diversity," #37, FSPA Constitutions

Addressing a U.S. Catholic bishops' conference on Black Catholics in 1989, Sister Thea said:

"What does it mean to be black and Catholic? It means that I come to my church fully functioning. This 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. ...A spirituality that is communal, that tries to walk and talk and work and pray and play together—even with bishops.

“Now, bishops, I’m going to ask you all to do something. Cross your right hand over your left hand. You’ve got to move together to do that. All right now walk with me. See, in the old days, you had to tighten up so that when the bullets would come, so that when the tear gas would come, so that when the dogs would come, so that when the horses would come, so that when the tanks would come, brothers and sisters would not be separated from one another.” ...

Then she sang;

“We shall live in love,
We shall live in love,
We shall live in love today.

Deep in my heart,
Deep in my heart I know I do believe,
We shall live in love.”

Sister Thea proclaimed:

“Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change, but if each one of us would light a candle, we’d have a tremendous light.”