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“I’LL LIVE UNTIL I DIE”:

THE COURAGE OF SISTER THEA BOWMAN

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IN AN INTERVIEW for *60 Minutes* in 1987, Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, told Mike Wallace, “I think the difference between me and some other people is that I am content to do my little bit. Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. If each one of us would light the candle, we’ve got a tremendous light.”

Remaining true to those words, Sister Thea Bowman crowded a lot of “little bit” into her fifty-two years. In retrospect, much of what she did transcended the adjective *little*. She made decisions and faced situations that required a great deal of courage and influenced thousands. Part of her “little bit” philosophy was “to try.” Before she died in 1990, she said she hoped her tombstone inscription would read “She tried.” Her wish was later granted.

Known as Bertha during her childhood, Sister Thea was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, in 1937 and subsequently spent most of her childhood in nearby Canton. Her physician father, Theon, cared for many of Canton’s Black citizens. Her mother, Esther, was a teacher who instilled in Thea a love for learning and an appreciation of the arts and culture. She also hoped her daughter would be a proper, sophisticated, and sweet young lady. Thea, however, had a penchant to be bold, loud, and exuberant. At a very young age, she exhibited her tendency to search for meaning in life and to hold fast to what she believed. At the age of ten, this only child of Protestant parents decided to be baptized into the Catholic Church.

Both Theon and Esther realized the importance of a good education for their daughter, but the educational system for Black children in Canton was very poor. A year after Thea’s baptism, her mother enrolled her in the newly opened Holy Child Jesus School, founded by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in a salvaged army barracks.

“After six years of public schooling, it was perfect joy,” Thea wrote during her novitiate. “When Sister Mildred Burger became my teacher, she put me through eight levels of *Think and Do* books in one year...My friends and I were challenged every day to learn and help someone else. I was poor in math, so someone had to coach me. I was good in reading, so I had to help someone else.”

The welcoming, positive experience at Holy Child Jesus School contrasted with the rest of society’s attitude toward people of color. Thea witnessed the disrespect, rejection, and oppression inflicted on her people. But despite the prejudice she encountered, her mother cautioned her never to retaliate. “Returning insults makes you small like they are,” Esther said. Thea realized years later that she had been called to be a bridge of understanding and a peacemaker among various cultures.

Even more than the theology or doctrine of the Catholic Church, the way in which Catholics seemed to love and care for one another inspired Thea to become Catholic. The Sisters at Holy Child Jesus School, who lived a religion that was real and relevant and put their faith into action, impressed Thea, and she yearned to be part of their Order. But when she announced her desire to join the Franciscan Sisters, her distraught parents refused permission until Thea went on a hunger strike. Young Bertha, described as a very agreeable person, could also be firm in her convictions.

Thus, at the age of fifteen, Bertha headed north to LaCrosse, Wisconsin, taking with her many precious gifts—gifts she had learned from those she called the “old folks,” or elders, in her life. She had learned their coping mechanisms and survival skills needed during generations of oppression. Thea also carried with her the richness of her African American heritage and culture—its history, stories, music, songs, dances, rituals, prayers, symbols, foods, customs, and traditions. She also carried courage in her heart; in the convent, hers was to be the only Black face.

To honor her father, Bertha took “Thea,” which means “of God,” as her religious name. After professing her first vows, Thea began teaching at Blessed Sacrament School in LaCrosse, and then returned to Canton to teach English and music at Holy Child Jesus High School. After ten years, Thea’s Franciscan superiors recognized that she would be an excellent college professor. In 1968, Thea began graduate studies in English at Catholic University in Washington, DC.

The 1960s had been a time of turbulent transformation for the nation. Racial strife, riots, the Civil Rights Act, marches on Washington and in the South, church bombings, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy—a quest for justice and equality confronted the nation. Likewise, the late 1960s provided a time of transformation for Thea.

Far from the “old folks” in Mississippi and the solitude, sanctuary, and shelter of LaCrosse, Thea found soulful solace in the extended Black community in urban Washington. The liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council had encouraged her to discover her African American religious heritage and prompted her to enter her Church “fully functioning,” as she described it. She embraced her Blackness; being Black was good. Expressing her ancestral customs within the rather staid Western European liturgy was good, even desirable; Thea welcomed the Vatican II documents that encouraged the integration of ethnic rituals, including dance, into the liturgy. But she needed courage to own and proclaim her Black Catholic heritage in her life and in her Church.

Thea delved deeper into the richness of the Black oral tradition as she studied language and linguistics. Her exploration fashioned and formed her in sharing the stories and songs of her people, and her presentations reflected the lively preaching heard in traditional Black churches. Though women do not preach from the pulpit in the Catholic Church, Thea proclaimed she could preach everywhere else—in school, on the train, on the street corner.

Thea truly did preach everywhere. After completing her doctorate and traveling and studying in Europe, she returned to the classroom, this time at Viterbo College (now University) in LaCrosse, where she challenged and encouraged her students to think for themselves. Thea strongly believed that the students’ opinions were as valid as hers as long as they could support their opinions with evidence. She taught by example as powerfully as by word.

Thea’s entrance into higher education provided her with an even broader arena for “preaching.” She became a popular speaker on the college circuit, sharing her gift of Blackness in vibrant presentations that always included song. Thea challenged others to look beyond themselves, to look respectfully at others. She emphasized that cultural awareness required a spirit of mutuality: She was willing to learn about other cultures, and she asked others to walk with and appreciate with her the glory of Black culture.

As Thea’s reputation spread, her parents aged, and in 1978 she returned to Mississippi to care for them. Her bishop in Jackson, Mississippi, asked her to serve as a consultant to the diocesan Office of Intercultural Awareness; she eventually served as director, expanding her efforts to assail racial prejudice and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity. She became even more passionate in her vocation to speak and write about the significance of Black spirituality, history, culture, and song, about the Black family, and especially about being Black and Catholic.

Two years later, Thea helped found the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS) at Xavier University in New Orleans and served on the faculty. Once again, she brought her indomitable spirit, engaging personality, and prophetic vision to the Institute’s mission to provide an intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and cultural immersion into the Black Catholic experience. Thea taught courses in Black literature, Black religion and preaching, Black spirituals and songs and art. Thea’s classes were more than mere lectures; they were life-changing encounters.

In 1984, Thea faced the biggest challenge of her life. Both of her parents died, and she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Vowing to “live until I die,” Thea courageously continued her rigorous schedule of speaking engagements. As the cancer spread to her bones, she did not stop being a courageous witness for the Lord. Bald from the effects of chemotherapy and dressed in her customary colorful African garb, Thea arrived at her presentations in a wheelchair.

Despite unrelenting pain and her deteriorating condition, Thea accepted an unprecedented invitation—to speak to the U.S. bishops at their annual June meeting in 1989 at Seton Hall University. Thea spoke of the Church as her “home,” her “family of families,” and described her effort to find her way to that home. She instructed and enlightened the bishops on Black history and spirituality. She challenged them to continue to evangelize the Black community, to promote inclusivity and full participation of

Blacks within Church leadership, and to understand the necessity and value of Catholic schools within the Black community. She told them the “true truth” of what it meant to be Black in America—and to be a Black Catholic.

Then, in her soft Southern drawl, this petite, frail woman with big bright eyes and a pleasant smile invited the bishops to cross their arms, join hands, and move together as they sang “We Shall Overcome.” Tears and thunderous applause followed.

Thea knew no stranger. She offered compassion to the young man living with AIDS. She enjoyed a hearty laugh with her beloved “old folks.” She met and enchanted celebrities such as Harry Belafonte and Whoopi Goldberg. She encouraged single mothers. She spoke strong words couched in love to the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Yet her greatest testimony may have been the way she faced death, living until the end. That inspirational courage, that outlook, speaks to all cultures.

During her fifty-two years on Earth, Thea Bowman wove the diverse elements of her life into a garment as vivid and lively as her African garb. She was simultaneously an “old folks” child, a devoted Franciscan, an advocate of all cultures while maintaining her love for her “own Black self,” a proud maiden of Mississippi, a persuasive preacher, a tenacious teacher, a soul-stirring singer, a lover of the Church, a teller of the “true truth,” a faithful friend, a spiritual mother to many, and an instrument of peace, love, and joy. Before she died, she declared, “I want people to remember that I tried to love the Lord...that I tried to love, and how that computes is immaterial.” She tried to weave that garment until the very end—little bit by little bit.

At five o’clock on the morning of March 30, 1990, Thea was attended by her dear friend and fellow Franciscan Sister Dorothy Kunding, FSPA, who had traveled with and helped care for her. Sister Dorothy reports that Thea was sitting almost upright to improve her breathing. “I said, ‘Thea, many friends have said goodbye. It’s OK to die...Your Mama and your Daddy...are waiting for you in heaven. Don’t be afraid. You’re not alone. I love you. Goodbye, Thea.’ Thea’s head turned to the side and her shoulders dropped. She didn’t try to open her eyes anymore.”

Sister Thea Bowman has been called a saint, and many are working to have her recognized as such by the Church. But according to Sister Francesca Thompson, OSF, Thea “has already been canonized in the hearts and souls of those who knew and loved her.” Let the Church say “Amen!” ■

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