

Thea News

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 1 2003



I am somebody.
I'm somebody special.
I'm God's child.
I can change things.
I can make life better for myself, for my family, for my community, for the church, for the world.
I make life better when I say yes to God's will as it manifests itself in the circumstances of my life.
And I want to say yes to God.
I want to say yes to life, yes to hope, yes to love, yes to you, yes to eternity.

Excerpted from Sister Thea's 1989 concert, at St. Stephen's Catholic Church in Minneapolis, for people living with AIDS.

Thea's Spirit Lives on at Institute for Black Catholic Studies

by Beth Erickson

"Come by here, good Lord. Come by here. Oh, Lordy, won't you come by here!"

The music is alive in the church as the largely black crowd gathers for prayer, introductions, and liturgy. There is clapping, there is rhythm, and the praise-filled music is on every tongue.

When the hymn ceases, the invitation to the Lord still lingers in the air and a vivacious woman in colorful robes steps up to the podium.

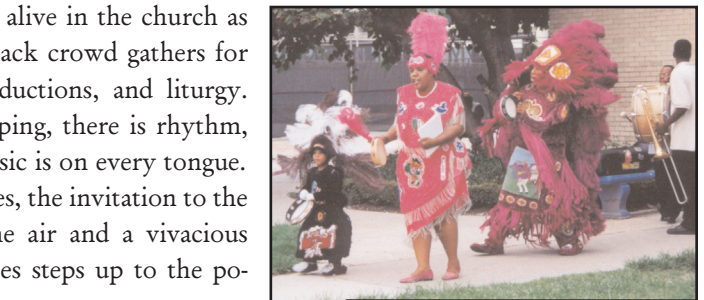
The elder of the group, Elencie Shynes, known lovingly as "Mother Shynes," has the distinct honor of offering the opening prayer to the 2002 summer session of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS).

Calling for blessings on the institution, its leaders, and students, Mother Shynes also acknowledges the spiritual presence of two of the institute's most charismatic leaders.

"Oh Thea and Bede! I hear your voices in the distance this evening," shouts Mother Shynes.

A ripple of agreement flows from the crowd. Everyone feels the presence of the late Sister Thea Bowman and the late Father Bede Abram. In fact, anyone who steps foot on the campus of Xavier University in New Orleans when the IBCS is in session will know immediately that the two are still having an impact.

"When I was here with them, it was the first time I ever felt like I was standing on holy ground," said Edith Stevens, a graduate of the institute who now teaches there.



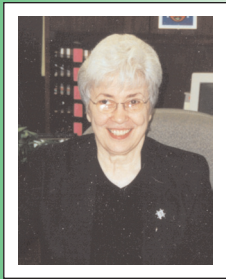
Top: Members of the Mardi Gras Indians join in the annual IBCS ancestral celebration. Bottom left: Also celebrating that evening is Edith Stevens, far right, dressed in white in honor of the ancestors. She joins in song with others in the IBCS community. Bottom right: Liturgical dancers keep the African American traditions alive. Photos by Beth Erickson.

"Institute for Black Catholic Studies," continued on page 4

From the TBL Coordinator

March 1, 2003

Photo: Jolice Greteman, FSPA



Charlene Smith,
FSPA

Dear Friends of Thea,

Stained-glass windows in churches create atmosphere and tell stories about spirituality and saints. Besides gracing cards, icons, murals, paintings, portraits, and prints, our beloved Thea has twice appeared in stained-glass windows.

The millennium year 2000 marked her first appearance in a stained-glass window, in De Pere Wis., in Our Lady of Lourdes Church. There, the "Risen Christ and Communion of Saints" main sanctuary window includes among the holy communion Kateri Tekakwitha, Katherine Drexel, Dorothy Day, Thea, Mother Teresa, Thomas the Apostle, John XXIII, and Joseph Cardinal Bernardin.

The second Thea appearance in a stained-glass window is in Chicago. And, what an appearance! In the fall of 2002, on a bright October Sunday morning, St. Benedict the African parish at 340 West 66th Street, dedicated stained-glass windows of four remarkable women: Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Harriet Tubman (1820?-1913), Rosa Parks (1913-), and Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937-1990). Spectrums of color stream from the windows enlivening a foyer that accommodates overflow crowds at liturgies.



Sister Thea Bowman and Rosa Parks



Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth

Pastor David Baldwin and his parish (www.sweetsweetspirit.org) commissioned well-known Chicago artist and illustrator, David Lee Csicsko, to create windows depicting the New York prophet and preacher, the Maryland slave turned Civil War abolitionist, the Alabama mother of the modern Civil Rights Movement, and the Mississippi Franciscan revered as "Everybody's Sister." Csicsko's 6'x 3' windows are colorful, dynamic, evocative, inspirational. They lure passers-by to come close, to revel in their intricate designs.

Corrina Thomas, FSPA, and Fran Sulzer, FSPA, who attended the event, remarked, "The windows match the vibrant, faith-filled ceremony and St. Benedict's parishioners. The artist captured Thea's spirit. She is beautiful, lively; her large eyes and beaming smile radiate warmth, tenderness, and love." Chicago resident, Lee Etta (James) Clark, a Holy Child Jesus School classmate of Thea's, said, "The shooting star on Sojourner's and Thea's windows remind us they both said they were 'going home' like a shooting star."

In this issue of *Thea News*, editor Beth Erickson highlights a program cherished by Sister Thea: the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University, New Orleans. Beth shows us Thea's bright spirit thriving in the Crescent City. At *Thea News* we remain amazed how Thea "keeps on" beckoning her friends, old and new.

Regular readers of *Thea News* have calendars marked for a major Thea event in La Crosse, Wis. Friends of Thea will celebrate the 3rd annual Thea Bowman "Flavor of Soul" commemoration on April 2, 2003. Everyone is welcome.

— Charlene Smith, FSPA

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Elders and Ancestors

by Donald Michael Clark

Songbirds, whether caged or free, sing. They sing because they must. It is their nature. Sister Thea Bowman was a songbird. Even musical purists would have to agree, albeit reluctantly, for she sang and sang her whole life long: faith songs, joy songs, fun songs. Most people who met her, even for a very short time, heard her sing.

Even when Thea spoke—and she spoke far and wide—there was a song-like quality in what she said. She was well versed in discourse. Perhaps it came from her background among the old folks of her early church and town encounters in Canton, Miss. Maybe it was from her dedication to music, both as a girl and as a young woman. Or perhaps it was her graduate degree in English and her experience as a teacher. She could make her thoughts rise as on eagles' wings, float as unseen eddies of light air. They would swoop, then break, jazz-like, from the elegant to the homespun, from the uptown to the down home, in a single sentence. She made people listen, and she helped people laugh, learn, and love.

Sister Thea Bowman was never a caged bird. She was free. She learned early in life from her parents and from the black people of her home that she was “a child of God.” And all God's children are free! So the segregated South and the tiny town of Canton were no cage for her. Neither was the small Holy [Child Jesus] Catholic school or the church that she boldly entered in response to God's call. That call came through the outstanding examples of selfless service Thea had seen, heard, and experienced in the lives of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She freely joined their religious community and survived, nay, thrived happily as their single sister of color. She even survived the bitter cold of “that northern state, Wisconsin” while being formed in the motherhouse.

The free and formed songbird—her body erect, head thrown back, throat open—sang: “I sing, because I'm happy. I sing, because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow. And I know he watches me.” With that, Sister Thea Bowman set out to live the life she sang about in her songs. If she sang that God is love and that Jesus loved her, she lived lovingly with other people and invited them to love her back. If she sang about the community of

believers that she was “washed in the blood of the Lamb” and sanctified in the Holy Spirit, she immersed herself in that same church, not letting the shortcomings of some of its members scandalize her.

Thea was no handwringer where people's real-life limitations were concerned. More often than not, she would take people by the hand and walk their walk with them. Without threatening, cajoling, or preaching, she could maintain vibrant and respectful contact with other people, being at home with their differences, complementarities, and potentialities until they were friends. Then, Thea could lead those whose hands she held to others who needed holding themselves. “Reach out and touch somebody's hand. Make this world a better place.” That was one of Thea's songs, and that is what she was both willing and able to do with her own life.

It is touching testimony to hear people of varying ages, heritages, and national origins speak of Sister Thea Bowman and what she meant to them. They are ready witnesses that this tall and tuneful woman from Canton, Miss., was brave, inquiring, and friendly enough to reach out across their differences to become a sister to them. Native, Asian, European, and Hispanic American; Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist; atheist, academically educated, worldly wise, monied, or impoverished—Thea was a sister to them and many more like them. In countless ways she learned to be the type of person every Christian wants to become and every person ought to be.

Within the Catholic community, Thea Bowman sang her song, extended her hand, opened inquiring minds, reconciled, and taught. The Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of New Orleans received many a blessing from her. She taught many students: vowed religious women and men, lay folk, presbyters, seminarians, gifted Catholics all, how to minister within the church and the African American community. She taught them how to speak to the life experiences and history of an often neglected and misunderstood portion of the citizenry and the church, how to preach to black Catholics, how to preach to everyone else who needed to hear the good news.

“Elders and Ancestors,” continued on page 7

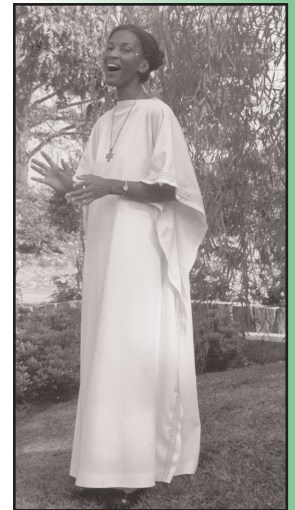


Photo: Diocese of Jackson

Thea singing in Jackson, Miss.

Father Donald Clark, since deceased, was pastor of St. Augustine and St. Monica Church in Detroit at the time this was published.

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“Institute for Black Catholic Studies” *continued from page 1*

“It really felt like these people were chosen by God, and I was in the midst of saints.”

Indeed, the unique gifts and charism of Thea and Bede attracted many people from around the country to the institute. When the institute was in session, the two were lead dancers in the liturgy and active members of the faculty. They wouldn’t let blacks or whites who were part of the institute isolate themselves. They encouraged people to mingle, to talk, and live their values in community. Their gifts of straight talk, critical analysis, and reflection on the richness of the black experience remain present on the campus today.

Launched, as a small pilot program, in 1980, the IBCS was proposed and developed by members of a national symposium of black Catholic clergy and religious. With three faculty, a director, and 16 students, it had modest beginnings. Today, the institute boasts 40 faculty, a full-time director, and 110 students, and has become the leading national center for black Catholic studies.

The IBCS offers a master’s degree program in theology, and separate certificate and enrichment programs in youth ministry, leadership, and catechetics.

The institute fulfills a deep need for black Catholics and provides an invitation for them to remain an active participant in the church by revitalizing the liturgy. Its teachings

combine the heritage of the Church with the rich history and traditions of the black community.

“The spirituality of the African American Catholic will transform the entire Catholic Church,” said Sister Eva Regina Martin, director of IBCS.

In fact, that transformation is already happening in many churches and communities throughout America. Raising hands during recitation of the “Our Father” or other prayers, clapping, liturgical

dance, and the richness of black spirituals and Gospel music have found their way into many modern Catholic celebrations.

The nationally and internationally respected African Americans and African priests, vowed religious, and laity who are teachers at the IBCS are dedicated to continuing to enrich the Catholic experience by educating blacks and whites on the richness of the black experience—meeting the charge of Pope Paul VI who called on black Catholics to “enrich our Roman Catholic Church” with their “precious and original contribution.”

For black Catholics, this evangelization of the black community “puts things in perspective and makes you feel like you are in the middle of the Church and not on the perimeter,” said Sister Martin.

When she was a student at IBCS, learning from, among others, Sister Thea, Sister Martin got her first taste of learning from the black perspective—learning about black writers from Thea and witnessing the cultural nuances in black vs. European writings.

“Europeans didn’t understand the African way of doing things. They told people what to do based on educational level. In the black community, things were settled in the Council of Elders. In the African community, community is important, not the individual. I had a new way of looking at life and appreciating my own culture, the black culture,” she said.

And, that is precisely the goal of the IBCS. By educating students to look at the Church’s teachings through the eyes of black experience—using critical analysis and reflection on black religious, historical, cultural, and social experience—the institute is preparing lay men and women, religious, and clergy for leadership and ministry in today’s Church.

“We bring models—like black priests, nuns, and bishops—to people who don’t normally get them,” said Kaffy Babineaux Belvin, a graduate of the program and currently the coordinator and instructor in the catechist certification program. “The greatest thrill for me in coming here is the level of education of the people.”

With over 500 predominantly African American parishes, but less than 250 African American priests, and only 13 African American bishops, that kind of modeling is critical to the transformation of the black Catholic community.

It is also important to the white community of



Top: Kaffy Babineaux Belvin, Lafayette, La., teaches in the catechist certification program at IBCS. Above: Acting director for the first week of IBCS’s summer session 2002 was Dr. Jamie Phelps, OP (standing at right), who is also an associate professor of theology at Loyola University in Chicago. Photos by Beth Erickson.

believers. For Father Richard Myhalyk, learning about the black approach to spirituality and the history of the black community is important to his work as superior general of his community at St. Michael's College in Vermont.

"I recognize it as the best vehicle for helping people minister in community. Catholic means 'universal' and seeing things from the African American perspective helps you appreciate the breadth and depth of the universe," he said.

But modeling isn't the only way the institute teaches its students about the black experience. The institute takes a holistic approach to education.

"Our program is unique. It's not how much you know, but what you do with what you have. We

need to get in touch with ourselves and consider the whole individual in order to meet needs," said Belvin. "I've never been part of a program where the spiritual life of the individual is as high as it is here."



Acting director Dr. Jamie Phelps, OP, (standing) and IBCS director Eva Regina Martin, SSF, (seated) visit with members of the IBCS community. Photo by Beth Erickson.

Thea's legacy of calling African Americans to service in the Church remains vibrant and alive at IBCS. Her influence is most evident in the special place of honor the institute accords to ancestors and elders.

According to Sister Martin, "Thea knew that if she wanted to learn something in the African American community, she needed to sit at the feet of the elders and learn from

them—even though she was educated at some of the most erudite facilities. So that's what she did." ●

The Story of Tahirah Thea

There is a 12-year-old girl in New Orleans blessed to be the namesake of Sister Thea Bowman. Tahirah Thea is the youngest child of Edith and Allen Stevens, both students at the IBCS when they met Sister Thea, who quickly became their friend.

Just before Thea died, she called a pregnant Edith. [She wanted to talk to the baby. I was surprised. I said [Sister Thea, as soon as our daughter is born, we'll come see you.] She said, [I called because I get the feeling I'll never get to see her. So I want to talk to her.]

Edith held the phone to her womb for 15 minutes. [The whole time Thea talked, the child flipped all over.] After Thea was finished talking with the baby, Edith asked her what she said. Thea replied, [I told her I loved her and knew she would do great things, and I want her to be a strong black woman.] She also told the young child she would dance and play drums. Today, Tahirah Thea does both. As for what else Sister Thea told the young child, that's between Thea and Tahirah Thea!

IBCS Community Shares Memories of Thea

"Sister Thea had an infectious, vibrant faith in her that people responded to rather spontaneously. They practically hungered to meet her and to know her."

—Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry
Archdiocese of Chicago

"[Thea] took a bold step. Here was a black woman, standing in African dress, showing it's all right to be a woman, praise God, shout, and use our gifts to give to the Church."

—Eva Regina Martin, SSF
Director, IBCS

"I don't know any other person who passed through IBCS or crossed my path who influenced me as much as Sister Thea because the woman had the strength of a lion. She never gave in to pain or suffering and we knew she suffered. If I could ask the Lord one thing, I'd ask him to allow me, in whatever He's assigned me, that I could endure it with the grace she did."

—"Mother" Elencie Shynes
Instructor, IBCS

"She really pushed students to reach for the best—daring them to move beyond where they thought they could go. She was absolutely honest in terms of their presence in the African American community and the need to critique that black folk should really own who they are and their heritage, and make no apologies for it."

—Pat Haley, SCN
Coordinator of Spiritual Life, IBCS

"Just in her presence, spiritual teaching transpired."

—Kaffy Babineaux Belvin
Graduate and Coordinator of the IBCS Catechist Certificate Program

"[Upon catching me and others trying to drop her class as students] Thea said, 'I intend to teach you because I assume you came here to learn; so I'll bring to the table what you need to learn and you bring to the table your gifts.' That became the model for my own teaching—learning the lessons of the people sitting in front of you."

—Eva Marie Lumas, SSS, PhD
IBCS Professor

Thea Notes . . .

Fulfilling Thea's Dream

The 7th Annual Scholarship Dinner supporting the Thea Bowman Black Catholic Education Foundation is being held on Saturday, April 12, at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pa.

Curtis Aikens, a vegetarian chef from the Food TV Network, will be the keynote speaker focusing on "Education and Evangelization."

Now in its 13th year, the Thea Bowman Black Catholic

Education Foundation continues to grant scholarships and promote access to and success in higher education among African Americans. To date, more than 60 scholars have graduated from Catholic universities throughout the U.S. thanks to the foundation's support.

Five students are chosen annually to participate in

the program. The foundation makes a commitment to those students until they have graduated.

Unique to the program is its focus on mentoring to ensure successful degree completion for all scholars. Two African American members of the faculty or admini-

strative staff at the university serve as mentors, tutors, spiritual guides, parents, and friends to the Thea Bowman Scholar.

Each student who has participated in the mentoring program has finished their academic year in good standing.

For tickets to the dinner or for more information on the Sister Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation, please contact Executive Director Mary Lou Jennings at 627 E. 39th Street, Hibbing, MN 55746, 218-263-4865 or email marylouj11@aol.com.

Thea-named Scholarship Grants Conference Fees

Multicultural youth ministers who want to learn more about preaching the Good News to young Catholics, may be eligible for a scholarship to attend the National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry.

The Sister Thea Bowman Scholarship, sponsored by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, grants \$500 toward conference fees and travel. For more information, contact the National Foundation for Catholic Youth, 415 Michigan Avenue, NE, Suite 40, Washington, DC 20017-1518.

In the Works

Paul Cartwright, director of Libraries in Yazoo City, Miss., is writing a bio-bibliography of Sister Thea for scholars and researchers.

In it, he will cover the manuscripts, speeches, audios, and videos of Sister Thea's as well as a bibliography of her main research focuses, including music, African American studies, religious studies, literature, and general readings.

Pray For Us

Sister Thea's words and prayers continue to inspire folks around the world and make their way into publications. Here are the latest:

Viterbo

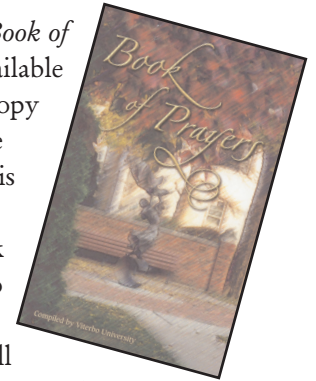
University Book of Prayers: Available for \$5 per copy (supplies are limited), this 112-page prayer book features two prayers by Thea, as well

as prayers from scripture, tradition, the Franciscan heritage, the Viterbo community, and prayers for peace. Sister Thea graduated from Viterbo in 1965.

To order, contact Viterbo Communications & Marketing, 815 Ninth St. South, La Crosse, WI 54601, 608-796-3040 or lewaughtal@viterbo.edu.

Boston College's Red Book: An introduction to the Jesuit and Catholic community, this book also provides a number of prayers and blessings. Sister Thea was the first black woman to receive an honorary doctorate in Theology from Boston College, 1989.

To inquire about purchasing the book, contact Boston College, Center for Ignatian Spirituality, 96 College Road, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467.



Familiar Faces?



This rare find is a photo of the late Sister Thea Bowman with the greatest heavyweight champion in memory, Mohammed Ali. It was taken in Jackson, Miss., in 1984 and was submitted to the Thea Bowman Legacy office by Pat Hinckley of Mosinee, Wis., who attended college at Viterbo University with Sister Thea.

If you have information for *Thea News*, we would appreciate your taking the time to let us know. Drop us a note at *Thea News*, 912 Market Street, La Crosse, WI 54601-8800 or email theanews@fspa.org.

“Elders and Ancestors” *continued from page 3*

Her constant question was: “Do you know anybody who has heard too much good news?” She taught people to do their best and to be positive in their outlook, attitudes, and actions.

“Bertha” Bowman had wanted, as a little girl, to be a preacher. She had the gift, the charisma, of preaching the word of God with power. And, preach she did in the creative and inventive ways to which all the baptized are called: “I can preach in the streets. I can preach in the neighborhood. I can preach in the home. I can preach and teach in the family. And it’s the preaching that’s done in the home that brings life and meaning to the word the priest proclaims in his official ministry in the pulpit.”

Her preaching evoked many a voice in the midst of the assembly: Amen! Say so! Teach! Well! The

word of God is proclaimed with power in many, many places if there are people to preach and teach. Women and children, aunts and sisters—all can preach. In fact, they must preach in the little pulpits of life’s circumstances if the Lord is going to be heard in church and if hearts are going to be touched and lives changed. Sister Thea was discerning enough to accept such a ministry and do it with perfection. She preached from her pew each time the Spirit moved her to soar vocally above the assembly, slicing melodies that harmonized with the congregation’s song. She preached when a solo seized her, and her soul could not be contented until she rended the air with praise.

The annals of saints’ lives tell the stories of such preachers. These same chronicles tell the stories of holy women who mothered saints, sistered saints, and counselled and challenged great and powerful men: Monica of Carthage, Scholastica of Monte Cassino, and Catherine of Siena, to mention only a few. One day, the story of Thea of Canton may be joined to theirs. Sister Thea was an advisor to the bishop of her home diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, for years. Bishop Joseph Brunini had ears for Thea’s ideas, insights, and instruction during the time she was in charge of the Office of Intercultural Awareness. Bishop Brunini’s auxiliary bishop and successor, Bishop William Houck, was no less attentive. Archbishop [James] Lyke of Atlanta was Thea’s longtime friend, and, knowing wisdom and holiness when he encountered

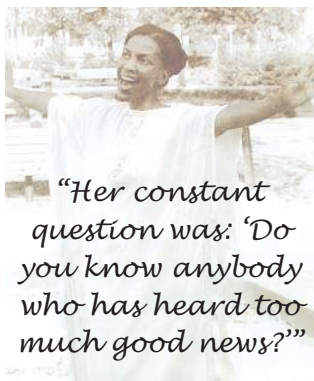
them, he paid close attention to what Sister Thea said. And, she said plenty about life, love, black family life, sickness, struggle, and survival.

When Sister Thea was only 50 years old, she did something the holy women noted earlier never did. She was interviewed by Mike Wallace for *60 Minutes*. In one short segment, Thea was encountered by more people than Monica, Scholastica, and Catherine addressed in their combined lives. She had a more far-reaching pulpit than most presbyters and deacons who preach weekly. Perhaps it was God’s way of being good to a daughter in Christ who was experiencing the suffering of living with cancer until she died.

When Sister Thea Bowman addressed the Catholic bishops of the United States at Seton Hall University in New Jersey shortly before she died, it may not have been her finest hour, but it was certainly one of her greatest. She had been a singer, speaker, teacher, preacher, minister, sister, and friend to so many for the long time that they had known her from the novitiate; but it had been far too short a time for those who had come to know her in later years. Now she was spending time speaking with her brothers who were leaders in the Catholic family. She was eloquent, and her words illuminated the room. She fanned into flame the love and compassion of her hearers. Some of her passion for people and her conviction for the church seized those men from the many tribes and nations under God’s sun.

In the end, she asked them, then ordered them, to move together and to join hands. They did it. And, then she sang. From her wheelchair, Thea sang a determined dream song. And, the bishops sang with her: “We shall overcome! We shall overcome! We shall overcome someday. Deep in my heart, I do believe; we shall overcome someday!”

Eyes and cheeks glistened with tears and voices quivered with emotion as the song swelled to the ceiling and blasted through the doors and windows. For a bright and unforgettable moment, “someday” was that day. Distance was overcome. Indifference was transformed into loving concern. Any lingering listlessness and misdirection became intense purpose. All those songbirds sang. And, they did overcome! ●



“Her constant question was: ‘Do you know anybody who has heard too much good news?’”

Photo: Diocese of Jackson

Thea Bowman 1937-1990

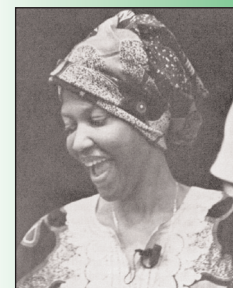


Photo: Patricia Teilpops, FSPA

Sister Thea (nee Bertha Bowman) was a native of Canton, Miss., and the granddaughter of a slave. At age 9 she chose to become Catholic and then attended a new mission school taught by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. At 15, she went to La Crosse, Wis., to become a Franciscan Sister.

She is known for helping bring the richness of black culture and spirituality, as well as the message of community and equality, to the Catholic Church and to society.

A scholar, teacher, singer, poet, storyteller, preacher, and performer, Thea traveled the country, spreading her message in hundreds of venues. She developed breast cancer at 46, but continued her public appearances choosing, as she said, “to live until I die.” She died in 1990 at 52.

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to cover costs of printing
and mailing.

The 3rd Annual Thea Bowman "Flavor of Soul" Commemoration

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Spend "An Evening with Thea" at 7 p.m.
Fine Arts Center Main Theatre,
Viterbo University (www.viterbo.edu), La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Presenter: Michael O'Neill McGrath, OSFS, Washington, DC,
famed author and Thea artist, (www.beestill.com).

Give Me That Old Time Religion
This Little Light of Mine
Every Time I Feel the Spirit
I'll Be Singing Up There
Precious Lord Take My Hand
I'll Fly Away
We Shall Overcome

Spirited gospel music by the Viterbo Concert Choirs
under the direction of Daniel Johnson-Wilmot.

General admission.
Free will offering at the door.

A book-signing and art-signing session follows.