



## Sister Thea Bowman: Her Song Goes On

by Friar Jack Wintz, O.F.M.

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*Sr. Thea Bowman, 1937-1990 (CNS/Beatrice Njemanze, Mississippi Catholic)*

On March 30, 2010, some 50 friends of Sister Thea Bowman gathered at her grave in Memphis, Tennessee, where she is buried beside her parents. She had died exactly 20 years earlier of bone cancer at age 52. At the graveside ceremony, Sister Thea, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, was hailed as the “patron saint of racial reconciliation” by Redemptorist Father Maurice Nutt.

## ▲ Thea's Song

A new book entitled *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*, by Charlene Smith and John Feister, was published in February and has received very positive reviews. Coauthor John Feister's first meeting with Sister Thea came about in her native state of Mississippi in 1985, when he interviewed her for *St. Anthony Messenger*. In Feister's lively article, "'I Am Beautiful, You Are Beautiful': Thea Bowman's Ministry of Joy," Feister gave this description of Thea: "She is a tall, graceful, beautiful woman who is conversant in both standard English and her own Southern black dialect....The day I met her, she was wearing a flowing Nigerian robe and her hair was plaited in tight, short braids. She was conducting programs at two schools in Madison County where she grew up....The first stop was the eight a.m. All Saints' Liturgy with the children at Holy Child Jesus Elementary School, Thea's alma mater, in Canton. After a music rehearsal that aroused even the sleepest child in the 300-strong congregation, the liturgy proceeded with the children's favorite religious songs such as 'When the Saints Go Marching In' and 'This Little Gospel Light of Mine'—all accented with body movement, hand clapping and skillful piano accompaniment in black spiritual style." *St. Anthony Messenger*, July 1985).

The description gives us a little flavor, at least, of what Sister Thea was all about. She went on to become widely known as a promoter of intercultural awareness in Mississippi churches as well as in black or mixed parishes across the United States. She was a popular educator, evangelist and gospel singer, drawing capacity crowds wherever she went.

## ▲ Biographical Sketch

Here's a fuller summary of Sister Thea's story. We start with a paragraph quoted from a brief life of Thea that was one of 32 sketches of saintly persons, introducing chapters of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"Born as Bertha Bowman in 1937 in Yazoo City, Mississippi, the daughter of a physician, Theon E. Bowman, and a school teacher, Mary E. Coleman Bowman, Bertha thrived in a richly textured extended African American family. When local schools did not offer a good education, her mother enrolled her in a school run by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of La Crosse, Wisconsin. Bertha converted to Catholicism at age ten, and six years later she entered the congregation that had taught her. In becoming a sister, she took the name Thea" (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, p. 89).

In 1953, Bertha joined the Franciscan Sisters as an aspirant, moving to the motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters in La Crosse, Wisconsin. As the only black woman in her community, she had to struggle to maintain her cultural identity. Sister Thea professed her first vows in 1958 and began teaching in an elementary school in La Crosse. Then in 1961 she was assigned to teach elementary school at her alma mater, Holy Child Jesus School, in Canton, Mississippi.

She received her bachelor of arts degree in 1965 from Viterbo College, run by her community in La Crosse. The next year she enrolled at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., for graduate studies in English Literature, receiving her Ph.D. in 1972. From 1972-78, she taught at [Viterbo College](#), eventually becoming chair of the English Department.

During this time, she was also closely involved in founding the National Black Sisters Conference, emerging as a popular vocalist and public speaker. In 1978, she returned to Canton to care for her aging parents. She was also recruited by the Catholic Diocese of Mississippi to develop outreach to nonwhite communities and to help develop intercultural awareness among all races. She continued and expanded her speaking and singing ministry nationally. In 1980, she helped found the [Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans](#), where she taught until 1988. In 1984, Sister Thea was diagnosed with breast cancer. Both of her parents died before the year's end.

## ▲ Thea's Franciscan Heart

“Thea owed much of her spirituality to the Franciscan tradition,” write the authors of *Thea’s Song*. “She projected an authentic, happy style.... Be joyful, be peaceful. Reach out; help the poor, the outcasts of society, the sick, the psychologically needy. Divest yourself of possessions and give to the poor....” Coauthor Charlene Smith, F.S.P.A., was Thea’s classmate and remembers well her love for St. Francis and St. Clare.

“St. Francis had loved nature, and, in turn, nature was responsive to Francis in unusual ways. Thea shared this gift. Growing up in the South, where the climate lured people to the out of doors much of the year, Thea had learned to revel in nature. She learned to appreciate Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and Mother Earth, as St. Francis called them. In his spirit, she knew how to treat all of nature as neighbor: love the animals and all sentient beings and they will reflect love back to you. She continued to be fascinated by birds--and enjoyed warbling back to them!” (*Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*, p. 138).

### ▲ Enthraling the Bishops

In June 1989, less than a year before her death, Sister Thea was invited to address the assembly of U.S. Catholic bishops at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, a meeting that your own Friar Jack was covering for *St. Anthony Messenger*. Thea’s topic was evangelization among Catholic minorities.

“Thea seized the attention of the bishops,” writes John Feister, coauthor of *Thea’s Song*, “singing ‘Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.’ Their attention was riveted on her. Often during the talk, the bishops interrupted her with sustained applause, sometimes with laughter.” After she concluded her talk, writes Feister, “she directed these bishops to stand, cross arms, clasp hands, and join her in singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Thea had called Archbishop Eugene Marino of Atlanta, Bishop John Ricard of Baltimore, and Professor Albert Raboteau of Princeton to stand beside her wheelchair and clasp hands with her. Some of her brother bishops were seen with tears streaming down their cheeks....”

Feister went on to quote Catholic News Service reporter Jerry Filteau, who supplied these details of the event in his “Weekly Roundup” of June 19, 1989 (Catholic News Service archives):

“Sister Bowman...enthralled the bishops with her half-hour speech. She spoke to them about black sufferings and hopes, contributions and needs, history and future, and above all, faith, in the U.S. Catholic Church....Dressed in an elegant African American gown, her voice clear and resonant, eyes sparkling and hands animated, Sister Bowman’s only betrayal of the advanced bone cancer ravaging her body was the wheelchair she sat in as she spoke” (*Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*, pp. 260-261).

### ▲ Her Song Goes On

*Thea’s Song*, as embodied in this *Life of Thea Bowman*, will surely live on in the memory of those who read this book. And who knows? Someday she may officially be declared a saint, as many call her now. The memory of Sister Thea will live on, as well, in all who continue to seek “racial reconciliation” with her kind of joy, courage and sparkle.

## Father Jack Wintz, O.F.M.

Father Jack Wintz's stories and photos have taken the Franciscan friar all over the United States as well as Asia, Europe, the Middle East and to more than a dozen Latin American countries. He has been writing, editing and photographing for *St. Anthony Messenger* (a national, Catholic family magazine, circulation 310,000) since 1972. He was editor of the magazine from 1999-2002 and now serves as senior editor. Since 1973 he has been editor of the popular religious education monthly newsletter, *Catholic Update*. In May (2006) Father Jack received the St. Francis de Sales Award, the highest honor given to an individual by the Catholic Press Association.



Among Father Jack's many interviews are those with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Gene Kelly, Bob Newhart and Senator Ted Kennedy. He is author of the inspirational book, [\*Lights: Revelations of God's Goodness\*](#) (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996). The book traces his spiritual journey as a Franciscan friar and journalist. His most recent books are the children's story, [\*St. Francis in San Francisco\*](#) (Paulist Press, 2001) [\*A Retreat With Pope John Paul II: Be Not Afraid\*](#) (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001) and [\*Anthony of Padua: Saint of the People\*](#) (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005). In addition to his theological training, Father Jack holds an M.A. in English literature from Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. He was ordained in 1963.