

Commentary – Dawn 12-1

‘Going home like a shooting star’

My husband and in-laws all speak fondly of St. Philip Catholic Grade School in East St. Louis in the Diocese of Belleville, Illinois. They attended grades one through eight at 8213 Church Lane with the Sisters of Notre Dame and a few lay women instructing their students in the Catholic faith and academics.

On a recent trip to the St. Louis area, I was finally able to see the famed brick building up close. I had a brief glimpse of it from the Metrolink many years ago and I appreciated the opportunity to get a better look.

Now known as the Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School, the school educates grades K-8 with 100% of the students graduating from high school and 95% attend an institution of higher learning. Although it is located in an area of extreme poverty, I was surprised to observe that the school and church appeared to be in great condition. I was also happy to see that the building remains a Catholic school.

Graduates of St. Philip have reconnected on social media, plan informal reunions and support their grade school alma mater financially.

Learning more about Sister Thea, I watched a video was “Sister Thea Bowman speech to U.S. Catholic Bishops,” on the USCCB YouTube channel. I admit I didn’t know who she was other than St. Philip School now bore her name. The video captured a half hour 1989 presentation from this beautiful and animated religious woman in African dress. She was a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

She was captivating when she spoke of her faith and her heritage. Sister Thea sang with an amazing and powerful voice, mesmerizing the room full of mostly white bishops, ending her speech by leading the bishops in We Shall Overcome while grasping hands.

I noticed that she was slender with thinning hair. She never stood up during the speech, even when all the bishops rose from their chairs to sing. I wondered if she was seriously ill.

“This well-crafted, yet at times, quite spontaneous message spoke of the church as her ‘home,’ as her ‘family of families’ and as her trying to find her way ‘home.’ She explained what it meant to be African-American and Catholic. She enlightened the bishops on African-American history and spirituality. Sister Thea urged the bishops to continue to evangelize the African-American community, to promote inclusivity and full participation of African-Americans within church leadership and to understand the necessity and value of Catholic schools in the African-American community,” [sistertheabowman.com](http://sistertheabowman.com) wrote of her USCCB address.

Archbishop José Gómez, the outgoing president of the USCCB talked about this video in his final address to the bishops as present just a few weeks ago. He called it “one of the most moving moments in the history of this episcopal conference.”

“...Sister Thea told the bishops, ‘We know that if we do stay together ... we shall overcome ... and build together a holy city, a New Jerusalem ... where they’ll know we are his, because we love one another.’ Brothers, that’s what this moment is all about. It’s about remembering that we’re in this together, that

we belong to God, and that we're all called to be saints. It's about each one of us doing what God is calling us to do to build his kingdom," he said in his address.

The Des Moines diocesan newspaper, The Mirror, ran a story in their November issue about an Ankeny women's group who were inspired by Sister Thea and gave a presentation at Our Lady's Immaculate Heart Parish on Nov. 12 and 13.

She is now known as Servant of God. Sister Thea Bowman's cause for canonization is being reviewed. The U.S. bishops endorsed her cause Nov. 14, 2018, in their fall assembly.

She was suffering from breast cancer, confined to a wheelchair when she addressed the bishops in June 1989. Sister Thea would die in 1990 at the age of 52.

A granddaughter of slaves, Bertha Elizabeth Bowman was born in 1937 to physician Dr. Theon Bowman and educator Mary Bowman in Canton, Mississippi. The religious women of the FSPA and priests of Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity helped to form her in faith. Bowman converted to Catholicism due to their influence and impressed "with how Catholics put their faith into action."

Taking the religious name Sister Mary Thea, she honored the Blessed Mother and her father, Theon. Thea translates to God according to [sistertheabowman.com](http://sistertheabowman.com).

Sister Thea served as a teacher, serving in various grade level classrooms. Upon earning her doctorate she became a professor of English and linguistics. She directed the Office of Intercultural Affairs for the Diocese of Jackson where she would "assail racial prejudice and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity."

Wisconsin Life reported that "she dedicated her life to civil rights. She worked to empower the Black community, while educating others about African American's history and experience."

Viterbo University, where she studied, described her as a singer, poet, preacher, master teacher, evangelist and African American catalyst.

In sister's biography at [sistertheabowman.com](http://sistertheabowman.com), she said her life, "was always one of Gospel joy, enduring faith, and persevering prayer even in the midst of racial prejudice, cultural insensitivity, and debilitating illness..."

"When asked by her dear friend and homilist for her funeral, Father John Ford, S.T. what to say at her funeral, Sister Thea responded, 'Tell them what Sojourner Truth said about her eventual death, I'm not going to die. I'm going home like a shooting star.'"