

Sister Thea On her way to Sainthood

'Servant of God' could become first black American saint

by Alexandra Moyer

ROSEDALE — When Sister Charlene Smith first learned of Sister Thea Bowman's cause for canonization, she was "pleased" but not "surprised." She said Sister Thea was "a lot like Jesus" because of her "magnetic" personality.

"Before she died in 1990, the black Catholic Church in the United States declared her saint by acclamation," Sister Charlene said. "I think that her story becomes even better known. I think people will be very impressed with her and will love it if she is elevated to sainthood."

There are currently less than a dozen American saints and none of them are black. Sister Thea is joining black Catholic Americans Pierre Toussaint, Julia Greeley, Henriette Delille, Mary Elizabeth Lange, and Augustus Tolton in their path towards sainthood.

In June 2018, Sister Thea was declared a servant of God, the first step towards sainthood. Bishop Joseph R. Kopacz approved of Sister Thea's cause for sainthood in November 2018.

In late 2018, 38 tourists led by Father Maurice J. Nutt took a spiritual pilgrimage to Israel from Oct. 21 to Nov. 1 for the cause for the canonization of Sister Thea.

The process is still in the diocesan investigative phase, according to the Chancellor for the Diocese of Jackson Mary Woodward, and will take another year to 18 months.

To become a saint in the eyes of the church, one has to satisfy five requirements. They first have to become a 'servant of God' at least five years after their death, and need to have led a life of "heroic virtue."

They then need to have performed two miracles when they were alive or when prayed to after death, and, lastly, canonization.

Woodward said Sister Thea's miracles had to have occurred after her death, one for beatification and after her beatification for canonization.

"To declare a miracle, another canonical process has to be opened involving medical

experts and witnesses and the congregation's experts," Woodward said. "We currently do not have a miracle that has been investigated."

In Sister Bowman's June 1989 speech to the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference, she began by singing "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child," to help them understand what it was like for her to be black in the church and society.

In between singing, she pleaded, "Can you hear me church? Can you help me?"

She was asking the bishops to help the Church be what it is meant to be: inclusive.

"They still talk about black people in the church, you know you hear it over on the sidelines," Bowman said to the bishops. "They say we are lazy, they say we are loud,

we're irresponsible, they say we lower the standards."

At the end of her speech, Sister Thea began singing "We Shall Overcome" and had the bishops stand and join hands.

According to Sister Mary Ann Gschwind, Sister Thea's roommate at the Catholic University, many in the Catholic

community believe her effort in uniting the bishops was her miracle.

Sister Charlene looked back at her 35-year friendship with Sister Thea and said she learned to be true to herself, to be a good teacher, to be a good administrator, and to be kind. She reminisced of the times Sister Thea would teach children with their five fingers to respect different cultures: the black, white, yellow, red, and brown people.

To Sister Charlene, Sister Thea was a woman who was "very in touch with God" who tried to teach others of the racial injustices within and outside the Catholic Church.

"[The church] did not encourage vocations among the religious communities or the priesthood. They did not ask black people to take any leadership responsibilities," Sister Charlene said. "They did not spend a lot of effort, improving education for black [children]."

Woodward believes Sister Thea has touched many people on "so many levels"

and her spirit is still present in her chancery and diocese.

"Her tenacious grit in facing racism personally head-on and letting that drive her to educate and inspire others to move beyond the sin and evil of racism as much as she was able in the time she had on earth is what I would consider extremely beneficial to her cause," Woodward said. "She was a dynamo of wisdom, compassion, intelligence, and tenacity. As she suffered from her cancer she continued to travel and spread the message of inclusion of everyone at the table."

Sister Thea's fight against the institutionalized racism still continued when she was dependent on her wheelchair after being diagnosed with bone cancer in 1984. She passed at the age of 53 in 1990.

"Her remark was always 'I'm going to live until I die' and all she wanted on her tombstone was 'She tried,'" Woodward said. "She had grace, dignity, and a unique form of humility that made those she encountered feel God working through her."



Sister Thea Bowman, right, with Sister Charlene Smith. (Photo: FSPA.org)

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