

# Sister Thea Bowman: Communicator of Joy

*By Antoinette Bosco*

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About 30 years ago, I had the privilege of meeting Sister Thea Bowman, the first African-American woman to enter the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wis. A granddaughter of slaves, she became the first African-American woman to receive an honorary doctorate in theology from Boston College.

She was gorgeous, brilliant and immensely talented. I knew when I met her that I would never forget this incredible woman.

I agree with veteran journalist Mike Wallace, who spoke with Sister Thea for a “60 Minutes” profile in 1987, writing afterward: “I don’t remember when I’ve been more moved, more enchanted by a person” than by Sister Thea Bowman.

Now, Sister Thea’s life story is told in an authorized biography written by Sister Charlene Smith, her special friend and member of her religious order. Co-authored with John Feister, **Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman** (Orbis Books) is the amazing story of how Sister Thea converted to Catholicism at age 9 and was determined at age 15 to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

Sister Thea, who was the only daughter of a physician and teacher, became a teacher herself, then a singer and lecturer who believed so strongly in the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sister Celestine Cepress, another friend and member of her religious order, referred to Sister Thea as a “shooting star.” That would be my memory, too.

My encounter with Sister Thea happened when we both were presenters at a huge program about the journey of faith that was sponsored by the Archdiocese of St. Paul and

Minneapolis. This was to be a gathering for growing awareness of what it means to have – and share -- faith.

Arrangements were made for both of us to stay at the same hotel. We had breakfast together and then walked to the auditorium and spoke of our lives. At the time I was 10 years older than she and a single mother of seven. Sister Thea was then the consultant for intercultural awareness for the Diocese of Jackson, Miss.

Sister Thea brought reality and song to the program that day. She was blessed with one of the most beautiful operatic voices I had ever heard! She could have had an amazing secular career, but she chose to be a living rainbow in God's family.

I was deeply saddened when I heard that she was dying of cancer. Amazingly, she worked at giving talks and interviews until the cancer overtook her. She said constantly, "Let me live until I die," and she never wavered.

God took her home 20 years ago on March 30, 1990.

I have read much of Sister Thea's writings, and I was especially moved by what she dictated three weeks before she died:

*"Unless we personally and immediately are touched by suffering, it is easy to read Scripture and to walk away without contacting the redemptive suffering that makes us holy. ...*

*"Let us resolve to make this week holy by sharing holy peace and joy with the needy, the alienated, the lonely, the sick and afflicted, the untouchable.*

*...*

*"During this Holy Week when Jesus gave his life for love, let us truly love one another."*

That truly expresses who Sister Thea was -- and is! -- a lover of all of God's people!



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### WELCOME to my HOME

...my "dot-com" Home Page, that is. I am very pleased to meet you, even in this long-distance way. You probably have tapped into my website because you know I am an author. Perhaps you've read my newspaper column, seen me in a guest appearance. Maybe you're here by a chance - a random link clicked on after turning up in a search. However you happened by, a resounding THANK-YOU to all who have tapped into my website to learn more about me and my books.

With humble pride, I'd like to tell you about my latest book:

#### [Mother Benedict, Foundress of Regina Laudis Abbey](#)

I have called her "A Determined Woman—Worker for The Lord," but that doesn't begin to say what her story really is. I spent the better part of ten years interviewing the Lady Abbess and writing what would be her definitive biography. I was honored, because she chose me to be her biographer, truly a very special enterprise, especially as I got to know her story from birth to nearly her mid-90's. Yet, after some three versions of the book were completed, Mother Benedict determined the biography should not be published in her lifetime. Then a few days after her death in 1995, an editor from Ignatius Press called Mother Dolores Hart, the former actress who entered this monastery at the height of her acting career in 1963, and asked if they had anything in writing about the Lady Abbess. She answered, "Do we!! We have a whole book."

I truly believe that Mother Benedict was somehow "behind" this request, having determined that now, having reached her place in Heaven, the book should be published.

Here are some of my other recent books:

- o [Miracles Abound](#)
- o [Growing in Faith When a Catholic Marriage Fails](#)
- o [Choosing Mercy](#)
- o [Shaken Faith](#)
- o [Pummeled Heart](#)
- o [LENT, an Uncommon Love Story](#)
- o [World War I \(America at War series\), published by Facts on File](#)
- o [One Day He Beckoned: One Woman's Story of the Difference Jesus Made](#)
- o [The Jesus Garden: An Easter Legend](#)