



SISTER THEA BOWMAN

African-American worship adds life, joy to the church

: Ask Father Michael Kwatera OSB *The Visitor*, Diocese of St Cloud M MN, 2.2015

The biblical stories of deliverance and redemption have shaped the faith and songs of African-Americans and have given them hope and strength in every generation

Q. In your January column you wrote about being open to different kinds of Christian worship, and you mentioned some Latino customs. Can you say something about the worship of African-American Catholics?

A. Your question is timely in view of last month's national holiday celebrating the Rev. Martin Luther King's birthday (Jan. 15; observed this year on Jan. 19) and "Black History Month" in February. The warmth and enthusiasm of African-Americans give life to the church, and their love for sung prayer gives gladness to the church.

This past Christmas season, the song that I kept hearing in my head and in my heart was the African-American spiritual, “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow.” This song was the first selection in the concert before the Christmas Eve Eucharist at St. Francis Convent in Little Falls where I was the celebrant.

Over the years I have enjoyed listening to it on a cassette tape of Christmas spirituals called “Round the Glory Manger.” The lead vocalist on this recording is Sister Thea Bowman (1937-1990), a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration who was a renowned evangelist among black Catholics and popular speaker on faith and spirituality in her final years.

A television documentary about her life and death includes some footage of the recording session of “Rise Up, Shepherd, An’ Follow.” There is an almost mystical look on Sister Thea’s face and great beauty in her voice. It is as if she has become the angel announcing the wonder of Christmas to the shepherds and to us.

Living the paschal mystery

In the notes to this recording, Sister Thea explains: “For more than 300 years in America, Black People have sung about poor little Jesus, born on Christmas, turned away from the inn, laid in an oxen manger. In these songs there is no triumphalism, only awareness of the human suffering of the Mighty Word who for our sakes leapt down from heaven; admiration for Mary’s pretty Baby; compassion for the Mother who loved and rocked him in a weary land; identification with the poor suffering Jesus and the poor shepherds who came to see him; the ever present shadow of the Cross, for Jesus came to die for our redemption.”

Sister Thea could express these sentiments because the paschal mystery — God’s Easter plan for our salvation in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ — was in her soul and in the soul of her people. She and her singing remind me that African-Americans know that there is no other

star, no other Savior to follow than Jesus Christ. They rose up and followed him through the dark centuries of slavery, through the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement of the past century, and now as vibrant members of the Catholic Church in the 21st century.

For African-Americans, the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is not something that happened way back in the past. It is the story of what happened most dramatically in the struggle for desegregation in the 1960s. The Rev. King was like a new Moses, leading his people from oppression to freedom.

The biblical stories of deliverance and redemption have shaped the faith and songs of African-Americans and have given them hope and strength in every generation. They know that God's word to us and God's saving deeds for us are one.

This is the truth that the liturgy teaches us, and never more so than at the Eucharist. During Communion at the Mass with Pope John Paul II in New Orleans, Sept. 12, 1987, the assembly sang the African-American spiritual, "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees." I remember thinking to myself how fitting it was that this song be sung at the papal Mass in New Orleans, a city whose heart echoes with the music of the jazz and black gospel traditions.

No feeble worship'

During an evening celebration of black music at a national convention of pastoral musicians, Sister Thea quoted an elderly black woman named "Blind Singing Lizzie."

I met Lizzie during my visit to Sister Thea in her hometown of Canton, Miss., in the 1980s. Lizzie declared that "You have to love the Lord God with your whole mind, your whole soul, your whole heart. You don't bring no feeble worship before the Lord!"

There is nothing feeble about the traditional black spirituals, which may have begun life as secret codes of directions for escaping slaves and later became the soul of African-American worship.

The spiritual “Deep River” asks us if we don’t “want to go, to that gospel feast, / That promised land, that land, where all is peace? / [I want to] Walk into heaven and take my seat....”

We do hope to have a seat at the heavenly banquet. But Rev. King and his people knew that we won’t be able to enjoy God’s heavenly feast of peace if we haven’t begun to savor its goodness and richness right here and right now, in our worship together.

We make a procession to that heavenly banquet table hand-in-hand, heart-to-heart, with victims of prejudice, violence and injustice, with those who draw water joyfully from their African-American ancestors, like composers Father Clarence Joseph Rivers who gave us the beautiful song, “God is Love,” when the vernacular liturgy was very young; Benedictine Father Dominic Braud of St. Joseph’s Abbey in St. Benedict, La.; and Grayson Warren Brown.

In introducing his setting of the “Great Amen” at a national convention of pastoral musicians, Grayson Warren Brown suggested: “Not merely to say ‘Amen,’ but ‘Amen, thank you, Jesus!’” This is the spirit of black Catholic worship across time and space, the spirit that empowers our service to God in church and sends us out to serve others in the world — the non-violent ministry of truth and freedom for which Rev. King gave his life.

And so I offer this prayer:

“Lord God almighty, as we remember your merciful love in Jesus Christ, we sing our ‘hallelujas’ for Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and we ask that there be plenty of good room in your kingdom for us and for all your children, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.”