

# Granddaughter of a slave, Sister **Thea Bowman** became an

WITH WORDS AND SONG, Sr. Thea Bowman brought people together to understand and appreciate that we all children of God. On the 25th anniversary of her death, we honor her contributions to the Catholic Church and to society. Catholic Extension crossed paths with Sr. Thea many times, supporting the church and school that she attended and adored—Holy Child Jesus, in Canton Mississippi—as well as funding her position as the Director of Intercultural Awareness in the Diocese of Jackson.

Sister Thea, originally Bertha Bowman, was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, in 1937. Her father was a physician and her mother a teacher who wanted their only child to be educated. Without good public school options for African Americans, her parents saved money to send her to Holy Child Jesus School in Canton, staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Although raised Methodist, Bertha admired the sisters and their faith. At 10, she converted to Catholicism and five years later, despite her parents' misgivings, joined the order in La Crosse, Wisconsin, as their first African-American sister. At the convent, she was a vibrant presence, often breaking into gospel-style song, and marveling everyone. She took her vows in 1958 and chose the name Thea, meaning "of God."

### Student and Educator

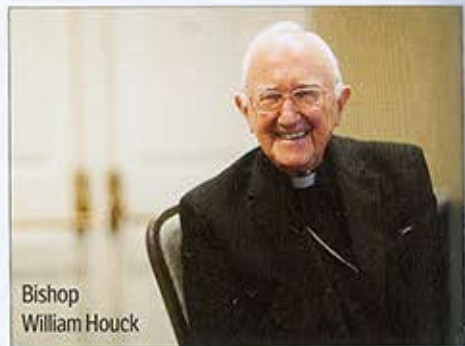
Sister Thea taught elementary school in La Crosse and high school at Holy Child Jesus, her alma mater, where she was the first African-American nun. She graduated from Viterbo University in La

Crosse, and pursued doctorates at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. and Boston College. She also helped found the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, where she taught. She helped many students pursue an education, often finding scholarships for African-Americans to attend Catholic colleges.

### Bridge builder

Outside the classroom, Sr. Thea also brought people together, often through music. She formed choirs and helped write hymnals. One of her favorite songs "This Little Light of Mine," is the early 20th Century gospel song, popular in the 1960s.

When Bishop William Houck, President Emeritus of Catholic Extension, arrived as an auxiliary bishop in the Jackson Diocese in



Bishop  
William Houck

1979, he worked with her while she was Director of Intercultural Awareness.

"She knew that each of us has unique gifts," he said. "She loved those differences and those different gifts. She believed in Jesus Christ and wanted to promote His value system of loving each other as He loves us. She wanted people to share together in parish life."

And faith is a powerful tool in civil rights and justice. "When you

# HER 'Little

## educator – and an inspiration

realize that God loves you, it does something special for you. It elevates you," the Bishop said. "But then you realize that I'm not the only guy on the block. That God loves others the same way. They too are worthy of his love. Sr. Thea reminded us that God loves us all. So we need to respect and live with our fellow humans, despite our different backgrounds, because we are all children of God. We all deserve human dignity."

### Leader

Sister Thea traveled around the U.S. with her message of community and reminded Catholics that black people are part of the Church, too. She believed that by recognizing the gifts of all participants, the Church would be a better place.

In 1989, she was invited to address the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in New Jersey about Evangelization among Catholic minorities. Dressed in a colorful African robe, she spoke and sang. "At the end, she asked us to stand, cross our arms, join hands and sing, We Shall Overcome," said Bishop Houck. "It was an inspiration and deeply emotional."

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—BISHOP WILLIAM HOUCK,  
*President Emeritus  
of Catholic Extension*

Diagnosed with cancer in 1984, Sr. Thea continued to speak out as robustly as possible—having pledged "to live until I die"—until she died at 52 on March 30, 1990.

Her legacy of faith and service continues. Schools, educational foundations, and residences for children are named for her. Catholic Extension continues to support her home diocese of Jackson, and its efforts to promote multiculturalism—with totals exceeding \$12 million—since 1907. "We are grateful," said Bishop Houck. "Without support from Catholic Extension, the Diocese of Jackson could not carry out its needed ministries." 🇺🇸

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"I think the difference between me and some people is that I'm content to do my little bit."

—Sr. Thea Bowman

# Light'

**SHINES  
BIG**