



SERVANT OF GOD THEA BOWMAN

by Joanna Dailey

At age ten, a little Black girl named Bertha, born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, asked her parents' permission to become a Catholic because she saw the way Catholics loved and cared for one another and for those who were poor.

Later, she joined the religious community who had taught her in her Catholic school. She was the first Black woman to join that community, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin. She took the name Sister Thea, a feminine form of Theo, which is Greek for "God."

Thus began a lifetime of education and teaching. Earning a doctorate from Catholic University in English and linguistics, Sister Thea became not only a teacher but a consultant in pastoral life for Black people. Through her lectures and performances of Black music, she was instrumental in encouraging an authentic Black expression in the liturgy of Catholic parishes.

Yet, she was honest in her assessment of the state of race relations in the contemporary Catholic Church. In her talk to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in June of 1989, she reminded the bishops of the material and cultural contributions made by Blacks to the country. She also reminded the bishops that Blacks had made a spiritual contribution as well and continued to do so. Yet, she admitted that in the Church, to be Black and Catholic still often felt like being a second- or third-class citizen. At the end of her talk, Sister Thea invited the bishops to rise and sing the anthem of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, “We Shall Overcome.”

Sister Thea died on March 30, 1990, and today she is seen as a prophetic leader in the American Church. In 2018, the bishops endorsed the cause of sainthood for Sister Thea. She is now known as Servant of God Thea Bowman.

Joanna Dailey is part of the content development team at Saint Mary’s Press and has a wide range of experience in the educational field. She has authored and developed texts for elementary, middle school, and high school religious education settings.

A written copy of Sister Thea’s address to the US bishops can be found at <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/Transcript-Sr-Thea-Bowman-June-1989-Address.pdf>.

A video of Sister Thea’s entire speech is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/l2S0tD6qFIA>.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration have devoted a significant part of their website to resources about Sister Thea’s life and work: <https://www.fspa.org/content/about/sister-thea-bowman>.

