

Servant of God Thea Bowman

Biography

Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman was a second generation free Black American born Bertha Bowman in Yazoo City, Mississippi in 1937. She later took the name Sister Thea when joining the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Being the only black woman in her order, Sister Thea committed her life to serving Black Catholics and their unique spirituality. When asked what it meant to be a black Catholic, she said —

“It means that I come to my church fully functioning. I bring myself, my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as gift to the Church.”

She held a Ph.D. in English from the Catholic University of America where she also taught, committing herself to educating others. Additionally, over the course of her life, she taught at Xavier University in New Orleans, Viterbo College in La Crosse, an elementary school in Wisconsin, and a high school in Mississippi.

Sister Thea Bowman helped shape Black Catholic identity in countless ways. She was instrumental in the 1987 publication of the first Black Catholic hymnal, *Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal*, making sure the hymnal properly showcased black spirituality and culture. She sang and recorded 25 spirituals and worship songs that were recently remastered and released on most music streaming platforms as recently as 2020! She traveled and spoke around the world, captivating audiences with her ministry of joy. Sister Thea taught those she ministered to about celebrating each culture’s unique differences and lifting those differences up in each culture’s distinctive expression of the Christian faith. When confronted with the fact that women were not allowed to preach in the Catholic church, she noted in one speech she gave that this rule could not stop her from preaching everywhere else!

Dying of cancer on March 30, 1990, at the age of 52, Sister Thea’s legacy lives on in the more than 18 institutions named after her, her music, numerous works she authored, and countless students who received a college education thanks to the Sister Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation. The U.S. bishops endorsed her cause for sainthood on Nov. 14, 2018.

Prayer

Prayer for Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman’s intercession

Ever loving God, who by your infinite goodness inflamed the heart of your servant and religious, Sister Thea Bowman with an ardent love for you and the People of God; a love expressed through her indomitable spirit, deep and abiding faith, dedicated teaching, exuberant singing, and unwavering witnessing of the joy of the Gospel.

Her prophetic witness continues to inspire us to share the Good News with those whom we encounter; most especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. May Sister Thea's life and legacy compel us to walk together, to pray together, and to remain together as missionary disciples ushering in the new evangelization for the Church we love.

Gracious God imbue us with the grace and perseverance that you gave your servant, Sister Thea. For in turbulent times of racial injustice, she sought equity, peace, and reconciliation. In times of intolerance and ignorance, she brought wisdom, awareness, unity, and charity. In times of pain, sickness, and suffering, she taught us how to live fully until called home to the land of promise. If it be your Will, O God, glorify our beloved Sister Thea, by granting the favor I now request through her intercession (mention your request), so that all may know of her goodness and holiness and may imitate her love for You and Your Church. We ask this through Your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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