



Thea Bowman, Sister and teacher

She lived 1937—1990

“Somewhere in the decision made by the teenage Thea Bowman lay a paradox worthy of a biblical epic. A Protestant child of the Deep South and childhood convert to Catholicism, she chose one of the whitest places possible to work out who she was as both a vowed religious and a black woman.

The significance of her decision and the consequence of the meeting of those seemingly incongruent worlds was on display in late March when some 85 followers and devotees from spots as distant as Seattle and Camden, New Jersey, gathered in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, for an observance of the 25th anniversary of Bowman’s “homegoing.” ...

When the 15-year-old Bertha Bowman (her birth name was Bertha Elizabeth, and her nickname was Birdie) was about to leave Canton, Mississippi, for her new life in La Crosse, her father, Theon Edward Bowman, understood far more than his daughter the challenges she might face. Bowman, a physician, was but a few generations removed from the harshest reality of black life in America. Relatives on his father’s side had been slaves.

Theon and his wife, Mary, a teacher, had already gone toe-to-toe with their very determined daughter. The couple, who had seen their only child convert from the Methodist church to the Roman Catholic church at age nine, were adamant. They forbade her to go off to become a nun. The teen wouldn’t back down, and began a hunger strike. Birdie finally “finagled her parents’ permission to go to LaCrosse,” ...

Bowman’s father made a last-ditch attempt to discourage the youngster. “They’re not going to like you up there, the only black in the middle of all the whites,” he said. To which she responded, “I’m going to make them like me.” Her parents eventually followed her into the Catholic church.

Certainly many members of her order came to like her and eventually see her as a model. But Bowman also faced difficult days during her formation. According to Thea’s Song, she encountered, especially during her early years, attitudes ranging from curiosity to resistance to downright ugly racist remarks, particularly from older members of the community. Black sisters were rare in any circumstance, and Bowman was unique in the FSPA’s experience.

What is perhaps more significant is that over the course of her time in La Crosse and in the relatively short period of ministry that followed (she died in 1990 at age 52 after dealing with cancer for several years), Bowman made members of her order and countless others take notice. One can imagine that Theon was worried that his daughter would lose her black identity and become more white in order to fit in with the sisters who had educated her as a child and whom she had come to admire. Quite the opposite occurred.

In time, she became an icon of black Catholicism enamoured of her African roots and confident enough to declare the importance of her heritage to a gathering of the U.S. bishops. In a memorable scene that might well represent the apex of her ministry, Bowman went before the assembled bishops in June 1989... From a wheelchair, racked with cancer that had metastasized to her bones and months before her death, she pronounced:

What does it mean to be black and Catholic? It means that I come to my church fully

functioning. That doesn't frighten you, does it? 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 tradition, 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.

Bowman obviously had not gone white. And though she made the case for black Catholics, indeed emphasizing to the bishops that "the majority of the people in the world are not white Europeans," it was a thoroughly white order rooted in Germany that had become her second family.

She once said she loved the FSPA teachers "because they first loved us." The order, which accepted a pastor's request to start a school in Canton in the late 1940s, was actually young Bertha Bowman's second encounter with Catholicism. Her first, which led this precocious seeker to her new denomination, was with priests, sisters and brothers of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, recognizing her intellectual gifts, sent her on to earn a master's and doctorate in English literature and linguistics at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. But it was Holy Child Jesus School and the sisters there who put her on path to religious life and also made her an outspoken and lifelong advocate of Catholic education. She returned to Mississippi in 1978 to care for her aging parents and was recruited there by Mississippi Bishop Joseph Brunini to develop outreach to non-white communities and to develop intercultural awareness programs. This also is the period where she became a national presence as a teacher and preacher.

For all those she inspired with her unique brand of preaching, often mixed with song delivered in an exquisite voice, her most enduring legacy may be her support of Catholic education, and particularly education for disadvantaged African Americans.