

REGIONAL FORMATION: SUMMER STUDY OF FRANCISCAN SAINTS

SERVANT OF GOD THEA BOWMAN



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“Maybe I’m not making big changes in the world, but if I have somehow helped or encouraged somebody along the journey then I’ve done what I’m called to do.” - Sister Thea Bowman

Born Bertha Elizabeth Bowman in 1937 to Dr. Theon & Mary Esther Bowman, she attended Holy Child Jesus School in Canton, Mississippi. She converted to Catholicism because she was inspired by the example of her teachers and the church’s service for the needy. At the age of fifteen, she joined the Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration and was the only African American in the Motherhouse in La Crosse, Wisconsin. She took the name Sr. Mary Thea, honoring the Blessed Mother and her father, Theon. She earned her doctorate in linguistics and became a college professor.

During the turbulent 1960s, Sr. Thea experienced a time of transformation, prompted by the Church’s liturgical renewal and her own growing awareness of the richness of her African American heritage. In 1978 she was appointed to direct the Office of Intercultural Affairs for the Diocese of Jackson. She became a highly acclaimed evangelizer, teacher, writer, and singer, sharing the JOY OF THE GOSPEL and her rich culture throughout the world.

In 1984, Sr. Thea was diagnosed with breast cancer. Even as the cancer moved to her bones, she continued to witness to the JOY OF THE GOSPEL. In 1989, just a year before she died, she was invited to speak to the US bishops at their annual June meeting. She arrived wearing African garb, sitting tall in her wheelchair, and sang and spoke with authority and love. She ended her presentation by inviting the bishops to stand, clasp hands and sing “We Shall Overcome.” In 2018, the US Bishops approved the cause for her canonization, and she was declared a Servant of God.

Her message is that when you help somebody, that’s how you become big, that’s how you become proud, not by getting things, but by helping somebody and leaving the world better than you found it.

This couldn’t be truer to me and my journey as a professed Secular Franciscan. For the past nine years since my profession, the Franciscan spirituality of inclusivity, welcoming, encouragement, acceptance, service, joy, and evangelization continues to awaken and affirm the very deepness of Jesus in me.

Our newest emerging fraternity is named after Sr. Thea. And yet, at first, when the time came to discern the name of the new fraternity, Sr. Thea was not on my radar at all. I had it in my mind that it should be called something else. But I took this to prayer and over the course of several months, signs were given to me that Thea was right here with us. I am so proud to have the fraternity named after her and am praying every day that one day it will be called St. Thea Bowman Fraternity!

Peace & All Good, Always!
Chris Blood, OFS