

## Women of the Church Study

### Month 8 Week 1

#### Thea Bowman

Thea Bowman is being recognized as “one of the most inspiring figures in American Catholic history...As a Franciscan sister she lived a wide-ranging ministry of joy, music and justice” (Nutt, 2019).

Thea was born in 1937 in Mississippi, the only child of middle aged parents; her father was a physician and her mother was a teacher. As she was growing up, Thea learned from the wisdom of the “old folks” in her community. Her grandparents were freed slaves. She experienced racism, segregation inequality and the struggle for Civil Rights in her native Mississippi. She was also exposed to the richness of her African American culture and spirituality. She knew God loved the poor and the oppressed.

Thea converted to Catholicism as a child through the influence and inspiration of the religious communities of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity. Thea’s conversion was rooted in the way she witnessed Catholics caring for one another, especially the poor and needy. She joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at age 15, where she became the only African-American member of the community. (Website)

Thea was trained to become a teacher; she worked well with children. She eventually earned her doctorate, becoming a college professor of English and Linguistics. During these years, Thea developed a deep appreciation for her identity as both an African American and a Catholic. “Thea was blessed with extraordinary talent and became a poet, a preacher, a master teacher, a vocalist and an African American catalyst” (The Franciscans). During the 1960s, Thea had both a spiritual and cultural awakening. The influence of Vatican II helped her rediscover her African-American religious heritage and allowed her to share this with others throughout the nation. Her life is said to have been one of Gospel joy and persevering prayer, even in the midst of racial prejudice and cultural insensitivity. (Website)

In 1984, Thea was faced with extreme challenges. She had returned home to care for her aging parents, who both died this time. She was diagnosed with breast cancer. Yet she vowed to “live until I die”, continuing her rigorous ministry schedule, despite health limitations and side effects from chemotherapy. In an unprecedented event, she addressed the US Bishops at their annual meeting at Seton Hall University. When she was finished her speech, which emphasized Catholic needs in the African American community, she invited the bishops to move together and sing with her “We Shall Overcome”, after which she received “thunderous” applause! (Website)

Sister Thea shared these words just shortly before her death in 1990 at age 52, “We unite ourselves with Christ’s redemptive work when we reconcile, when we make peace, when we share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God’s healing, God’s forgiveness, God’s unconditional love.”

#### References:

*Thea Bowman: Faithful and Free* by Maurice J. Nutt

<http://sistertheabowman.com>

“Thea Bowman FSPA” by the Franciscans Anderson SC

#### Reflections

Thea Bowman had a strong sense of identity. She is quoted as saying “When I say that I am beautiful...it means I am caring. It means I respect myself. It means I am confident” (Nutt 2019). Thea developed a deep appreciation for her identity as both an African American and a Catholic and readily shared this with others. Her spirituality was rooted in Jesus and the good news of the Gospel.

--What are the sources of my identity?

How do see myself and how do I show this to others?

How am I “beautiful”?

Thea Bowman’s grandparents were freed slaves. She lived during a turbulent time in America during which she

experienced racism, segregation, cultural insensitivity, inequality and injustice. Yet these things did not stop her from becoming a well-educated professional, an international celebrity and a well-known and reputed evangelist and leader in both Catholic and other Christian communities.

--What challenges have I faced and overcome to become who I am?

How can I support others to become the best he/she can be despite obstacles?

Thea Bowman had an energizing and engaging personality. She expressed a message of reconciliation and love and communicated joy and freedom. Yet she boldly confronted contemporary issues. This was especially evident as she expressed what it meant to be black and Catholic, enlightening and encouraging Church leaders to understand, evangelize and promote the African American culture within the Church in America.

--In what ways can I be bold, especially in my faith/spirituality?

What kind of things or people can help support me in speaking up for what I believe?

How can I speak the truth in love?

Thea was initially attracted to the Catholic Church based on her observations of how Catholics put their faith into action, by caring for one another, especially the poor and needy. Thea herself "radiated God's presence". Her ministry was "not to remain in the sanctuary of the church...but to move out and share Jesus with others, especially the poor" (Nutt 2018). She is quoted as saying "I don't make sense of suffering. I try to make sense of life...I try each day to see God's will..." (Website).

--How can I put my faith into action?

How can I "move out" and share Jesus with others?

How can I look past suffering to seek and find God's will?

## References:

An Hour with Thea Bowman by Maurice J. Nutt 2018

Thea Bowman: Faithful and Free by Maurice J. Nutt 2019

<http://sistertheabowman.com>

## Prayers/Devotions

### Opening Prayer

O, Lord, help us to be attentive to your commands. Help us to walk in unity. Help us to celebrate who we are and whose we are. Help us to overcome selfishness, anger, and violence in our hearts, in our homes, in our Church, in our world. Help us to knock down, pull down, shout down the walls of racism, sexism, classism, materialism, and militarism that divide and separate us. Help us to live as your united people, proclaiming with one voice, our faith, our hope, our love, our joy. Amen

Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA. From *Sister Thea: Songs of My People*

**"We Shall Overcome"**-- Led by Sister Thea following her address to the US Bishops:

We shall overcome

We shall overcome

We shall overcome, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We shall overcome, some day

We'll walk hand in hand

We'll walk hand in hand

We'll walk hand in hand, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

We shall live in peace

We shall live in peace

We shall live in peace, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

We shall all be free

We shall all be free

We shall all be free, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

We are not afraid

We are not afraid  
We are not afraid, TODAY  
Oh, deep in my heart  
We shall overcome  
We shall overcome  
We shall overcome, some day  
Oh, deep in my heart  
I do believe  
We shall overcome, some day

**Closing Prayer**

Children, Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers, go! There is a song that will never be sung unless you sing it. There is a story that will never be told unless you tell it. There is a joy that will never be shared unless you bear it. Go tell the world. Go preach the Gospel. Go teach the Good News. God is. God is love. God is with us. God is in our lives. Amen!

Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA. From *Sister Thea: Songs of My People*