

“When Sister Thea was asked what she understood her vocation to be about, she confidently replied, ‘I’m a teacher.’ Hers was a lifetime of education, growing into the incredible person of faith God called her to be. Maurice Nutt masterfully presents the uncompromising message and unsurpassable life of Thea Bowman, his professor and friend. Looking to learn from life’s teachable moments? Let Thea’s class begin!”

—Byron Miller, CSSR, President, Liguori Publications

People of God

Remarkable Lives, Heroes of Faith

People of God is a series of inspiring biographies for the general reader. Each volume offers a compelling and honest narrative of the life of an important twentieth- or twenty-first-century Catholic. Some living and some now deceased, each of these women and men has known challenges and weaknesses familiar to most of us but responded to them in ways that call us to our own forms of heroism. Each offers a credible and concrete witness of faith, hope, and love to people of our own day.

<i>John XXIII</i>	Massimo Faggioli
<i>Oscar Romero</i>	Kevin Clarke
<i>Thomas Merton</i>	Michael W. Higgins
<i>Francis</i>	Michael Collins
<i>Flannery O'Connor</i>	Angela O'Donnell
<i>Martin Sheen</i>	Rose Pacatte
<i>Jean Vanier</i>	Michael W. Higgins
<i>Dorothy Day</i>	Patrick Jordan
<i>Luis Antonio Tagle</i>	Cindy Wooden
<i>Georges and Pauline Vanier</i>	Mary Francis Coady
<i>Joseph Bernardin</i>	Steven P. Millies
<i>Corita Kent</i>	Rose Pacatte
<i>Daniel Rudd</i>	Gary B. Agee
<i>Helen Prejean</i>	Joyce Duriga
<i>Paul VI</i>	Michael Collins
<i>Thea Bowman</i>	Maurice J. Nutt
<i>Shahbaz Bhatti</i>	John L. Allen Jr.
<i>Rutilio Grande</i>	Rhina Guidos
<i>Elizabeth Johnson</i>	Heidi Schlumpf
<i>Augustus Tolton</i>	Joyce Duriga
<i>Paul Farmer</i>	Jennie Weiss Block

More titles to follow . . .

Thea Bowman

Faithful and Free

Maurice J. Nutt



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Red+Company. Cover illustration by Philip Bannister.

Excerpts from *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*, by Charlene Smith and John Feister, © 2009. Reprinted by permission of Orbis Books.

© 2019 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, except brief quotations in reviews, without written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018958562

ISBN 978-0-8146-4608-3 978-0-8146-4632-8 (e-book)

*In loving memory of my parents and my brother:
Haller Levi and Beatrice Lucille Duvall Nutt
Haller Edward Nutt*

*By blood and by love I am bound to them, though I
cannot look into their eyes or hear their voices. I
honor their faith and faithfulness, their memory and
history. I cherish their lives. I will tell their story, call
their names, and thus keep them alive.*

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

Chapter One

Being Bertha Bowman (1937–1953) 9

Chapter Two

Becoming Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA (1953–1961) 29

Chapter Three

Returning to Canton (1961–1965) 42

Chapter Four

From Canton to the Nation's Capitol (1966–1972) 52

Chapter Five

Viterbo College: Professor Bowman (1972–1978) 61

Chapter Six

Returning to Her Roots, Race, and Old Time Religion
(1978–1984) 68

Chapter Seven

Being Black and Catholic (1984–1989) 86

viii *Thea Bowman*

Chapter Eight

She Tried (1990) 114

Notes 121

Selected Bibliography 132

Index 137

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge with great esteem and gratitude my friends Sister Charlene Smith, FSPA, and John Feister for their seminal work *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* that I relied upon for guidance as I wrote this book. The inimitable Sister Thea came “back to life” through my insightful and engaging interviews with Sister Dorothy Ann “Dort” Kunding, FSPA, Flonzie Brown-Wright, Mary Queen Donnelly, Cornelia Johnson, Doris O’Leary, Veronica Downs-Dorsey, Father Glenn D. Parker, CSsR, Father Manuel Williams, CR, and Sister Eva Marie Lumas, SSS. To Rocco Palmo, Father Bruce Neili, CSP, Dr. Brian L. Turner, Dr. Marcus S. Cox, Loretta Deville, Bernadette Cheri, Carolyn Duvigneaud Thomas, and Will Jemison—thank you for encouraging me to make “Thea known for a new generation.” I continue to owe a debt of gratitude to my Redemptorist confreres of the Denver Province for your unwavering support of me. To Bishop Joseph R. Kopacz, PhD, bishop of the Diocese of Jackson in Mississippi, for believing in the sanctity of Thea Bowman and wanting to lift her up as a model to the world of prophetic holiness, missionary discipleship, and racial reconciliation by opening her cause for canonization. Likewise, I appreciate you entrusting me with assisting in Thea’s cause for canonization.

To my family and dear friends: most especially my brothers Cordell and Michael Nutt, and Verona A. Bowers, Stephen and Helene LaBerta, Richard and Larissa Banks, Michael P. McMillan, Dr. Reginald K. Ellis, and Paul and Shirley Foster for your unconditional love and for always “being there” whenever I needed you. Above all, I express my appreciation to Barry Hudock for inviting me to write a biography of Thea Bowman for the People of God series; and to the staff at Liturgical Press for your patience and perseverance with me as “Thea and I wrestled” to make sure that *her* story was told the way *she* wanted it told.

Introduction

“I still didn’t hear Mike Wallace say, ‘Black is beautiful.’” Confidently, albeit coerced, the veteran CBS News correspondent responded to the Mississippi-born, black Catholic sister’s persuasion by repeating, “Black is beautiful!” And the sister shouted with enthusiastic approval, “Amen!”

This is how many Americans were introduced to the charismatic and enthralling black,¹ vowed religious woman, Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA. At every moment of the *60 Minutes* interview, Sister Thea was confident, poised, assured, direct, and well informed. When she felt like she needed to, she threw a question back to Wallace, “What do you think?” And though Wallace was telling *her* story, at all times Sister Thea controlled *her* narrative. Sister Thea possessed what black “church folk” call “holy boldness,” meaning that you speak your truth knowing that it comes from the Lord. To minimize Sister Thea’s “holy boldness” and confidence as being any kind of self-aggrandizement would be to miss the totality of her personality, her spirituality, her mission, and her ministry. Thea was unapologetically simply being Thea.

The *60 Minutes* segment featuring Sister Thea that aired on May 3, 1987, held before the nation a black woman, an

2 *Thea Bowman*

engaging educator, an astute intellectual, an ardent advocate for racial justice and reconciliation; a soul stirring singer of the spiritual songs of her ancestors, a prophetic preacher, and an unconventional, African robe-wearing Catholic Sister. This mesmerizing televised interview featured a cancer-ridden sister who spread Gospel joy, brought healing to conflicts within communities and within the church, offered clarity to those who lacked understanding of the black Catholic experience, and taught us how to accept God's will while struggling, suffering, and ultimately dying. In her, we found someone extraordinary. Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Sister Thea Bowman was like no other person—and certainly no other nun—you would ever meet!

Well, no one ever “met” Thea; no, you *encountered* her. Her bodacious, engaging personality drew you to her. Once you had a “Thea encounter,” you would never forget her. Her personality and joy were so infectious that her presence seems to remain with us still. When her friends speak of Sister Thea, it is difficult to speak of her in the past tense.

My first Thea encounter occurred in July of 1984. I was a professed Redemptorist seminarian attending my first Joint Conference of black Catholic clergy, permanent deacons and their wives, religious men and women, and seminarians. The meeting was held in New Orleans, and I was a bit shell-shocked at seeing so many black religious women and men. I had attended a mostly white seminary and was not used to being around so many people who looked like me and who shared the same vocation. The highlight of that year's Joint Conference was attending the very first commencement of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS) at Xavier University of Louisiana, the only historically black and Catholic university in the nation. The three graduates—Sister Eva Marie Lumas, SSS, Sister Addie Lorraine Walker,

SSND, and Father James Voelker—would receive their master of theology (ThM) degrees in Black Catholic Studies, the first time such a degree was awarded in the nation's history. While I was elated to witness history, I was captivated by the speech given by the commencement speaker, Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, PhD. It was the first time I had ever heard her speak, and I do not remember what she exactly said that evening. But I have never forgotten how she made me feel. Her words penetrated the very core of my emotions, especially my feelings about having to assimilate into the dominant culture of my religious community to be accepted. She validated my cultural heritage and religious expressions and encouraged me to share my gifts with the Catholic Church. I recall feeling embarrassed because I cried throughout Thea's commencement address. Indeed, it was a cathartic moment for me. It was for me a moment of spiritual and cultural emancipation and liberation to be the black and Catholic child of God I was created to be.

After the commencement ceremony, my Redemptorist confrere, Glenn Parker, CSsR, introduced me to his good friend, Sister Thea. I was so in awe of her that I remember simply saying hello and that she said how happy she was that the Redemptorists were getting more black vocations. My Redemptorist confrere encouraged me to join him at the IBCS and I enrolled the following summer in the master's degree program there.

I came to know Thea Bowman during the last six years of her life. While I didn't know it at the time, I met her the same year that she was diagnosed with breast cancer and the year that both her parents died. One can only imagine what a dreadful year 1984 must have been for her, and yet she carried on with her life and her teaching, preaching, singing, evangelizing, and spreading the joy of Jesus Christ

with steadfast vigor and determination. Later I would learn that Thea's daily mantra throughout her struggle with cancer was that she was going to "live until she died." And that she did. As her student, I was amazed at her boundless energy as she taught her classes. Not knowing how long Sister Thea would live, I was committed to taking every class that she offered. I would also be the last student she would advise in the writing of their master's thesis. Without question, Thea Bowman was a demanding teacher. She could easily discern her students' cognitive and analytical abilities and would push them to produce their very best. If she thought that a student was not well prepared for a class presentation, she had no problem asking the student to sit down and come back to class better prepared tomorrow. She would not allow a student to present less than their best understanding of the material. Besides, Sister Thea was not going to let anyone waste her time or the class time by being unprepared! Seemingly tough as a classroom teacher, Sister Thea knew that she was not only preparing her students for classroom lessons but for life. She knew from her own lived experiences that nothing would be easily given to black students, and so they had to strive to be exceptional inside and outside of the classroom. Those were life-lessons that I am sure every student taught by Sister Thea Bowman has committed to memory and cherished in his or her heart.

The Thea Bowman story, like the woman herself, is far from banal or mundane. No, it is multifaceted, inspiring, and unconventional. Imagine growing up in the paradox of being the granddaughter of a former slave yet the only daughter and pride and joy of a middle-class educator and a physician amid the racism and segregation of the so-called separate but equal "Jim Crow" legal system of Mississippi. Her conversion to Catholicism was rooted in a pragmatic

living of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as she witnessed and benefitted from the dedicated Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration who taught at her childhood school, Holy Child Jesus in Canton, Mississippi. Seeing faith in action in her hometown as a child undoubtedly shaped Thea's understanding of Christian discipleship. She also desired to witness to Jesus Christ by serving the poor and marginalized, by educating those who did not have equal access to adequate education, to give comfort to those who were oppressed by the unjust and the unreasonable laws of the land. The indelible mark and profound impression that these white Northern nuns made on this highly impressionable black Southern girl convinced her that God was indeed calling her to leave all the things that were familiar to her. The yearning to serve God was undeniable. In Canton, Mississippi this young girl gave up her birth name, Bertha, and became Sister Mary Thea. She left behind all things Southern, soulful, satisfying, and familiar to sojourn to a far-away northern town called La Crosse, Wisconsin, to things unfamiliar and not always satisfying—especially the food! Her commitment to her vows and to the religious way of life is summed up in one of the spirituals she loved to sing: "*Done made my vow to Lord, and I never will turn back. I will go, I shall go, to see what the end will be!*"²

That initial "yes" to God and the grace of perseverance was the beginning of a short but phenomenal life. Given the magnitude of the impact and outreach that this one woman had on the life of the Catholic Church in America and beyond, it is difficult to limit her vocation to one singular aspect. But Thea herself, when once asked what she understood her vocation to be about, assuredly answered, "I'm a teacher." I would have to concur, but with an understanding of the vocation of teacher in the broadest sense. She

explained, “When I say education, I mean academic education, fiscal education, vocational education, parenting education, moral and value education, cultural education. We need a total educational package, and we need to make it available to everybody. And it’s your responsibility, it’s my responsibility. How can we impact the country in such a way that we can get a clear message to our elected leadership that this is what must be?”³ Thea understood her vocation as a teacher in the holistic sense that no human person should be without equal opportunities to be fully functioning in society and in the church. She had a clear demand that “each one, teach one!” It was not a clever rhyme or a pious phrase, but an urgent admonition to take what you know or what you have learned and share it with others. Thea felt that it is only when we share our knowledge, our experiences, our perceived understanding, our customs and traditions, our stories, and our faith that we truly become all that we are called to be in humanity as well as in the church—to truly *be* the Body of Christ.

While Sister Thea is often lauded as a powerful preacher, an effective evangelizer, and a dynamic singer, yet in all those endeavors she was teaching us. You never left Sister Thea’s presence without having learned something, experienced something, gained a new insight, garnered a new concept, gleaned a new possibility, or just felt like something had just happened to you simply by being in her company. And even if you couldn’t figure it out at that very moment, you knew that somehow you were blessed by the encounter. That’s what I mean about Thea being the consummate teacher. You were learning from her even when you didn’t realize you were being taught.

While there are numerous Thea teachable moments, in my humble estimation there are two instances that are quite re-

markable. I will elaborate on them in more detail in the telling of Thea's story, but they are also worth mentioning here.

The first remarkable lesson that Thea taught was when she was invited to address the United States bishops' conference at their June 1989 meeting at Seton Hall University. Thea wasn't feeling well, having undergone chemotherapy treatments for the vicious cancer that ravaged her body, most especially her bones. Wheeled to the center of the stage in her wheelchair, Thea spoke to the bishops as a sister having a "heart-to-heart" conversation with her brothers. She had something very important to say to them, something that needed to be said. While I will discuss later in detail what she said, it is important to note here the "Thea effect," the effect she had on people, her ability to take a very difficult and complex situation and through her innate genius and holiness speak in a way that diffused tension, anxiety, and fear and ushered in understanding, peace, reconciliation, and even renewal and reparation. Make no mistake about it: class was in session and Sister Dr. Thea Bowman, FSPA, even in her sickness and fragility delivered an unforgettable, well-crafted, and—in her typical Thea folksy fashion—spontaneous message on the struggle for racial justice and the need for evangelization, Catholic education, and full participation and inclusivity for black Catholics in the Roman Catholic Church in America. In a word, Thea was masterful.

Secondly, Thea exemplified in a very clear and conscious way what it means to accept suffering and death. During her six-year journey with cancer, she prayed for God's healing. Her faith enabled her to truly believe that if God didn't give her what she asked for, then God would give her something better. Because of her closeness to many people, Thea permitted her friends, colleagues, and students to visit her at her family home in Canton as she neared death. She

welcomed their prayers, story-telling, fond remembrances, laughter, singing, and sometimes simply their quiet presence in the room when she drifted off to sleep. In her final days on this side of “the river Jordan,” the teacher, evangelist, television personality, songstress, and prophetic preacher who had commanded audiences globally in classrooms, cathedrals, concert halls, and front porches did not want to be alone as she waited on the Lord to call her home. This “old folks’ child” had packed more life and living in her fifty-two years than most would or could have in a century. So she, deservedly, peacefully passed away at her family home at 136 Hill Street in Canton, Mississippi, but she didn’t die alone.

Throughout her life, Thea was so ubiquitous on the Catholic scene that it seems strange that there is now a generation who never knew her. There is an African proverb that contends that if you say the name of a loved one who has passed on, they will never die. Thea Bowman’s life and legacy lives on in the names, images, and ministries of many schools (parochial and public), institutions, religious education programs, halls, foundations, scholarships, liturgical Mass settings, gospel choirs, healthcare centers, women’s shelters, youth ministry centers, social service ministries, prayer rooms, stained glass windows, holy cards, paintings, sculptures, statues, and books (and now this book you are now holding in your hand), but more importantly for those of us who knew and loved and cherished her in our hearts, in those who are coming to know her and seek her intercession. I’m fairly confident that our beloved Sister Thea will be remembered for a very long time.

CHAPTER ONE

Being Bertha Bowman (1937–1953)

I'm what they used to call an "old folks' child." When I was growing up, my parents, especially my mother, made a concerted effort to keep me in touch with the elders. She wanted me to hear from them. She wanted me to learn the old songs and the old stories. She wanted me to learn from their lips about slavery and what they had been through.¹

Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA

Mississippi, like other Southern States in America, is tainted by its horrid history of slavery. Slavery is one of the world's worst mass atrocities. Twelve million Africans were kidnapped, enslaved, and shipped across the Atlantic to the Americas under horrific conditions. The brutal and inhumane treatment of enslaved Africans who were brought to the shores of the United States was like none other seen in the world. Africans captured from West Africa were packed and chained together like sardines in the bottom of slave ships for months, barely surviving the long transatlantic

journey. Nearly two million of them died at sea during the agonizing journey. Barely given nourishment, they endured diseases, torture, and the treacherous weather conditions while at sea. Once in America, these enslaved Africans were separated from all that was familiar to them: geographic locations, tribes, languages and dialects, customs and religions. They were also separated from one another to ensure that they could not communicate and thus not revolt against their sadistic treatment. The slave trade in America equipped plantation owners with the forced human labor to maintain their cotton, rice, and tobacco crops and their vast households. For centuries, enslaved Africans were held in bondage and randomly sold and separated without any regard to family ties or intimate relationships. They were verbally, physically, psychologically, and sexually abused and humiliated. If they dared to escape and were caught, they were brutally punished, maimed, or killed. Being an enslaved African in America meant that they were property and less than human, with no rights, respect, or recourse.

Slaveholders employed ministers who, using the Scriptures to justify slavery, instructed slaves to be obedient, respectful, and always to maintain a disposition of servitude. Enslaved Africans had a profound understanding of God and had their own rituals and belief systems, as well as their devotions and forms of worship. In fact, it was these secret, clandestine moments of communing with the Divine that spiritually and psychologically sustained the enslaved Africans amid the brutality of slavery. Whenever possible, slaves went deep in the woods, far away from their plantations, to what they referred to you as “hush harbors” to secretly pray and worship free from the restrictions placed on them while in the presence of their slaveholders or overseers. These religious gatherings happened after dark when their

field and house work was finished and they could move away from the plantation without being noticed. Coded announcements of these secret meetings could be spread to enslaved Africans through song. For example, someone might sing “Go Down Moses” or “Steal Away” as a signal that it was “hush harbor” time. The overseer would think that the person was simply singing a spiritual song, unaware that the slaves were moving far into the bush to meet with God. The “hush harbor” served as a location where the slaves could combine their African religious traditions with Christianity. According to Rice University’s religious studies professor Anthony B. Pinn, “In these secret services, slaves would preach a different version of the gospel, one that highlighted God’s desire that they be freed. These sermons were also laced with calls for justice and righteousness, and with a critique of slaveholders who claimed to be Christians yet treated other humans—Africans—as less than human. How was this consistent with the gospel’s call for love?”² The “hush harbor” service involved sacred dance, hand clapping, and holy shouts unto God in praise, lament, anguish, and seeking liberation. It was here, too, where the Negro spiritual originated, whereby enslaved Africans would reinterpret stories from the Bible that had double meaning, revealing ideas of religious salvation and freedom from slavery. They especially identified with the stories of the children of Israel and understood themselves, like the Jews, to be the chosen of God who would one day experience freedom.³ Through their enslavement, the Africans understood the core of Christianity to be that the Son of God named Jesus had suffered, died, and rose again to set the world free. It was this spiritual and earthly freedom that they, too, desired. Not knowing for certain when the opportunity for another “hush harbor” meeting would come,

they took advantage of this precious time with God and the meeting would last late into the evening.

Even after the Emancipation Proclamation decree⁴ and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime, Africans now living in America were not truly free because they had little to no economic, social, or political power to sustain and advance them. Many Africans in the South remained on plantations and continued to care for their former slave owners, while others sharecropped, meaning having to pay and or give produce to their former slave owners to work the land they formerly worked as slaves. Injustice and inequality was the oppressive lot of the children of Africa, and many remained servile to those who had held them in bondage.

Seventy-two years after slavery ended and the struggle for racial justice and equality continued, in Yazoo City, Mississippi, on Wednesday, December 29, 1937, a baby girl was born from the union of Dr. Theon Bowman and Mary Esther Coleman Bowman. They considered naming their newborn daughter Rosemarie. But that was not to be. Dr. and Mrs. Bowman would give their one and only child the name of a beloved relative. The baby girl was named Bertha after her father's younger sibling and only sister. Aunt Bertha insisted that Theon and Mary Esther give their newborn daughter her name. Bertha Bowman never had children and this new member of the Bowman family bearing her name would certainly be a precious gift to her. This newborn child was born into an ancestral lineage like most African American families and yet this family was unique in its spirit of compassion, striving toward achievement, seeking further knowledge through education, deep and abiding dependence on God, and unwavering commitment of service to others. These

noble characteristics would be manifested in the life and witness of Theon and Mary Esther's newborn daughter.

Theon Edward Bowman had been born on September 13, 1894, in Yazoo City, where his parents, Edward and Sallie Bowman, had established their home. The Bowmans were Methodists. Theon was the firstborn of three children. He had two younger siblings: his sister Bertha Catherine Bowman, born in 1899, who never married and lived most of her life in Memphis, and a brother, Jemison Charles Bowman, born in 1900, who would become a pharmacist and neighborhood drugstore owner on Memphis's southside.

Theon Bowman received his elementary and high school education in the Memphis public school system. He completed his college education in Nashville. He earned his medical degree from Nashville's Meharry Medical School in 1918, one of the few medical schools in the country that African Americans could attend. As a distinguished gentleman and scholar, the newly minted Dr. Bowman was eventually initiated into the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, the first black collegiate fraternity founded on the campus of Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, in 1906.⁵ Theon journeyed north to New York for his medical residency. He decided to practice medicine in Canton, Mississippi, because the black community there had no black doctors to care for them. Dr. Bowman established his office within walking distance of the Bowman home at 136 Hill Street. This town would be where he would practice medicine for over fifty years, raise his family, and be a pillar in the community for the rest of his life.

Mary Esther Coleman Bowman, born November 25, 1902, had a formidable lineage in Greenville, Mississippi, in the Mississippi Delta. Her parents were Jerry and Lizzie Williams Coleman. Lizzie was a highly acclaimed educator

in Greenville. She taught public school for forty-seven years and was principal of the largest African American public elementary school in Greenville. A high school in Greenville was renamed as the Lizzie Coleman Public School in 1923 by the local school board in recognition for her dedication to educating African American youth.⁶

It is no wonder that Thea would one day become an outstanding teacher. Education was in her familial DNA. Her mother, Mary Esther Coleman, graduated from Tougaloo College, north of Jackson, Mississippi, in 1919. Afterward, Mary Esther went to Chicago to attend summer school classes at Chicago Normal College.⁷ She returned to her hometown of Greenville and like her mother Lizzie, she began working as a schoolteacher.

Eight years her senior, tall, debonair, Dr. Theon Bowman met his future bride, Mary Esther Coleman, at the home of her aunt in Yazoo City. The couple were smitten and dated for six months before Dr. Bowman proposed to the Greenville schoolteacher on Christmas Eve, 1924.⁸ The wedding was set for 1925. The ceremony did not take place in a church building, probably because Theon and Mary Esther did not share the same denomination; Dr. Bowman was Methodist and Miss Coleman was Episcopalian. Instead the wedding was held on the lawn of the Coleman home in Greenville. Some fifty guests sat on lawn chairs and the wedding ceremony was officiated by an Episcopal priest, Reverend S. A. Morgan, and assisted by a Methodist minister, Rev. J. R. Rowe.⁹

By 1937, Theon was forty-three years old and Mary Esther was thirty-five years old. For the era, Mrs. Bowman was considered too old to be a first-time mother. Thea would later describe herself as an “old folks’ child” due to her parents’ advanced ages. Dr. Bowman was elated that his

beloved Mary Esther was soon to give birth to their child, and yet he was extremely cautious as the anticipated December birth date grew closer. He drove his beloved wife to Yazoo City to be cared for by her good friend and registered nurse Miss Alice Luse. He also wanted his wife to be in Yazoo City because Canton did not have a hospital for African Americans. The Bowman's child would be delivered at Yazoo City's Old African Hospital.¹⁰ Everyone was ready for the birth of the Bowman baby and had made careful preparations; all was in order, or at least they thought. Here's how Thea told the story of her birth:

My mother, they tell me, went downtown Wednesday morning, December 29, the fifth day of Christmas, to make some last-minute purchases for the new baby. But she went into labor, and had to return home quickly as she could. Miss Alice Luse called my father at his doctor's office in Canton. He got into his car and immediately drove the forty-five miles to Yazoo City. Then Miss Alice called Dr. L. T. Miller.

Dr. Miller said it was too soon. He took his time driving to the Luse home. By the time Dr. Miller arrived, my own father had delivered me! When Dr. Miller finally arrived, Miss Alice, having swaddled the brand new, perfect and beautiful, six-pound baby girl, answered the door with the child in her arms, just to prove that Dr. Miller wasn't always right.¹¹

To celebrate the joyous birth of his beautiful baby daughter, Dr. Bowman bought a bottle of expensive French champagne. He bought the champagne not to drink and celebrate with his friends, but to be preserved for a toast one day at his daughter's wedding reception. The champagne was a 1928 vintage Heidsieck Brut from Reims, France. Of course,

there would be no wedding reception and thus the thunderous popping of the cork never happened.¹²

Less than two months after baby Bertha Bowman's birth, her parents presented her for her christening at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Jackson on February 13, 1938. Reverend Arthur Buxton Keeling, who was also Bertha's godfather, christened her Bertha Elizabeth Bowman.¹³

As Bertha spent her early days of childhood in the Bowman family home in Canton, Theon and Mary Esther sought to expose their young daughter to the gift of music. They taught her nursery rhymes, the alphabet, and how to count. Young Bertha was quite fond of her mother reading children's stories to her at bedtime and throughout the day. Bertha marveled at all there was to learn, and she was very eager to gain new knowledge. She was an inquisitive child. Her mother, being a teacher, did not wait for formal training at school; Mary Esther would teach her daughter all the essentials long before she ever entered a classroom.

Mary Esther, a genteel Southerner, had hopes that her beautiful young daughter would be prim, proper, and at all times a sophisticated little lady. Though she would dress Bertha in frilly, doll-like dresses and tie ribbons in her hair, Bertha's illuminating and outgoing personality was evident early. The future Sister Thea would often reminisce with her friends how at times as a child her dear mother found her incorrigible because she was not prim and proper but often boisterous and over-the-top. She mused that she had inherited Dr. Bowman's wit, humor, and fondness for practical jokes. Bertha especially liked to tease her father and anxiously awaited his return home from his medical office so she could tease and play with him and tell him all about her day.

The Bowmans nevertheless were doting parents, and Bertha, whom they nicknamed "Birdie," was at the center of

their joy. To speak of her playfulness is not to say that young Bertha was unruly or disrespectful; quite the opposite. She was always respectful and well mannered, especially in the presence of the grown-ups and elders. Bertha was kind and wise beyond her years. Most certainly she witnessed the compassion and wisdom of her parents. Bertha was also an only child living with older parents, and so she was always in earshot of adult conversations. Naturally, she became used to mature topics of conversation and less childish banter.

Bertha's spiritual sensibilities were also evident as a young child. She enjoyed going to church with her friends as a child. Bertha was in awe of the music, preaching, and fellowship of her Protestant upbringing. Thea, recounting stories of her childhood and introduction to religion, would later remark that it was in those "old black churches that I learned what they called the 'old-time religion.' I wanted to grow up so I could be a preacher."¹⁴

Bertha began attending a public school in Canton at age three. At the same time, she also started going to Sunday school. She met with other neighborhood children in the home of their teacher, Mother Ricker, who taught them Bible stories, spirituals, and gospel music.¹⁵ At a very early age, Bertha was learning what would eventually become her hallmark—bringing faith alive through preaching, teaching, singing, and praising.

It was during this period that Bertha met Mrs. Ward, a next-door neighbor whom she would, as an adult, refer to frequently in her preaching, teaching, and storytelling. Thea would paint a vivid picture of how Mrs. Ward, a domestic worker, would go work for the white folks during the week, wearing her maid's uniform, but appear quite different on Sunday morning, the Lord's Day. As with most church-going black folks, Sunday was the day that you dressed in your

Sunday best and you honored God by going to church looking your best and giving your best in worship. Thea would dramatically detail how Mrs. Ward would “have church” before going to church. She would wake up early singing her jubilee, her song of praise, proclaiming the goodness of Jesus throughout her house, on the porch, in her garden, and then throughout the neighborhood as she made her way to the Lord’s house. For Mrs. Ward and so many of the elders around during Birdie Bowman’s formative years, religion wasn’t what you did only on Sunday morning; it was a part of who you were. Bertha learned from the elders that there was joy in serving the Lord and that joy permeated one’s whole being.

In a commentary that Thea would later write in a songbook of spirituals, *Sister Thea: Songs of My People*, she wrote, “I grew up in a community where the teaching of religion was a treasured role of the elders—grandparents, old uncles and aunts, but also parents, big brothers and sisters, family, friends, and church members. Many of the best teachers were not formally educated. But they knew Scripture, and they believed the Living Word must be celebrated and shared.”¹⁶ While Bertha’s early childhood denominational affiliation was betwixt and between both the Episcopalian and United Methodist churches, as well as other Protestant denominations, she would say later in life that there was something in the Catholic Church that captured and kept her and that she didn’t need to look anywhere else.

In 1941, a religious congregation of men called the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity (popularly known as the Trinitarians) and an associated congregation for women called the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity came to Canton to serve the white Catholics at Sacred Heart Catholic Mission. A few years later, after dia-

logue with the African American community who voiced a desperate need for quality education for their children, the Trinitarians established Holy Child Jesus Mission in 1946. The Mission first opened a school and shortly afterward a parish. Establishing a school and church in this small Mississippi town for the impoverished African American community seemed an insurmountable and arduous task, considering both anti-Catholic and racist sentiments of many local white people, as well as a scarcity of financial resources. However, during this time and throughout the years, the bishop of the Diocese of Natchez (now the Diocese of Jackson) was sympathetic to the pastoral and educational needs of the black community.¹⁷

Thea would later reflect that it was not necessarily the teachings of the church or the liturgy that drew her at such a young age to become Catholic; rather it was the personal witness of the priests, sisters, and laity at Holy Child Jesus that greatly influence her conversion. She saw their commitment to the poor and marginalized, their sense of community and prayerfulness, and their sincere care and concern for one another and for others. Even as a young child, Bertha instinctively knew that “being church” was about witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by being Christ to others, especially to those who lacked hope or joy. In her eagerness to join the Catholic faith, nine-year-old Bertha was “conditionally”¹⁸ baptized on Sunday, June 1, 1947, at Holy Child Jesus Catholic Church at 315 Garrett Street by the pastor, Father Justin Furman, a Trinitarian. Bertha made her First Holy Communion the following day.¹⁹

Bertha’s parents allowed their insightful and independent young daughter decide to become Roman Catholic on her own, while they remained at the time members of their own respective denominations. Bertha’s conversion to Catholicism

was so inspiring that this faith-filled child would lead her beloved parents into the Catholic faith several years later, first Mary Esther and then Theon. The Bowmans' conversion through the example of Bertha was clearly the embodiment of Isaiah 6:11: “. . . and a little child will lead them.”

Bertha attended the local public school for black children in Canton from the first to the fifth grade. Dr. and Mrs. Bowman, knowing that their daughter was highly intelligent, insatiably curious, and ever inquisitive, were aware that she would no longer be challenged by the poor quality of education at Canton's “colored” public school. The state of Mississippi allocated unjust and unequal financial assistance to “colored” schools as opposed to white schools. Many public schools had outdated and used textbooks and unfit school buildings, and the academically qualified school-teachers who taught there did not receive salaries equal to those of their white counterparts. Bertha began her education in the Mississippi public schools in 1941, some thirteen years before the groundbreaking United States Supreme Court *Brown v. The Board of Education* decision in 1954. Bertha Bowman was not afforded the sort of quality education that would help her and her classmates thrive and succeed. Fortunately, her mother, an educator herself, refused to allow her gifted daughter to fall behind and continually reviewed her studies with her at home.

The saying “God writes straight with crooked lines” surely applies to the educational trajectory of young Bertha's life. As the Bowmans were looking for a better educational opportunity for their daughter, help was heading to Canton by way of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA), a group of religious women who first came to America to educate German immigrants in the northwestern city of La Crosse, Wisconsin. After many letters sent to the

Mother Superior by the Trinitarian Missionaries, pleading with her to send sisters to educate the local impoverished black youth, as well as a personal visit from Father Lawrence to the motherhouse in La Crosse, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration relented and accepted the invitation to go to this place far from their Wisconsin base. A 1950 book on the history of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, offers this account:

Father Andrew Lawrence, ST, was preaching in the Midwest at the time (in 1942). He got himself invited to talk with the sisters at St. Rose Convent, pleading Father Hay's need for sisters to teach at the school. Both priests were persuasive. Father Lawrence began correspondence with the sisters. He frequently expressed hope that they would accept the challenge of starting a school in one of the southern communities he served. In 1946, Mother Rose Kreibich, FSPA, major superior (head of the community), visited Canton and, realizing the need, promised Father Lawrence that the sisters would help with one of the "most urgent needs of the mid-twentieth century."²⁰

The same author noted the challenges as well as opportunities that the novice FSPA missionaries would encounter: "Once the FSPA had come to Canton and established the new school, they knew how important their role was, and they dedicated themselves to it without one look back. In every sense, the term 'mission' is applicable to Holy Child Jesus School. In Mississippi, where the colored make up one half of the total population of 2,200,000, Catholics number about forty-four thousand; of those forty-four thousand, fewer than five thousand are colored."²¹

African Americans constitute a clear majority of the population of Canton, around seventy-five percent of the over

thirteen thousand residents of the city. The Catholic population of Canton was small. The city of Canton was indeed a ripe harvest for Catholic evangelization. While many African Americans in Canton belonged to Protestant denominations, there were more who did not attend church services on a regular basis or not at all. The Trinitarian Missionaries and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration had their work cut out for them. Before opening a school, the sisters had to spend time visiting homes and recruiting students to attend. Since the convent was established in the African American community, it was important that the sisters spent time getting to know and building relationships among their neighbors. Establishing a meaningful connection and building trust naturally took time. Neither the sisters nor the African American community knew much about one another. However, the black community desperately wanted quality education for their children and they were willing to entrust their children to these northern Catholic Sisters so that they would receive the best education possible.

Mary Esther Bowman expected much of her only child. Bertha would soon be old enough for high school and her reading was only at a third-grade level. The all-black public school in Canton was not preparing her adequately.²² As soon as the announcement came that the new Catholic school was ready to open, the Bowmans wasted no time in moving their daughter there. Bertha would be a member of the charter sixth-grade class of Holy Child Jesus Catholic School, one of approximately ninety pupils enrolled in the school for the 1948–1949 school year.²³ Although the school building was an old Army barracks, the parents and students were less bothered by what the school looked like than they were grateful for the learning that would take place in the makeshift classrooms. This Catholic school helped Bertha

advance in reading and learning. Years later, she would recall how this change in educational environments afforded her an opportunity to expand her learning and equipped her with the tools to succeed:

Because my mother wanted me to have a chance in life, she sent me to a Catholic school. The black public schools were tremendously disadvantaged and understaffed. At the black Catholic school, I remember using books given to us by St. Angela's Academy in Carroll, Iowa, and Aquinas High School in La Crosse, Wis.

We shared gym clothes with students in Breda, Iowa. The sisters begged a lot, and because they did, our school was much better supplied. Men and women all over the country gave a dollar or two to help us get an adequate education.

The priests, brothers, and sisters brought an extraordinary kind of dedication to the education process. They involved us in fundraising and helped us to educate ourselves. That was the key. They also worked with our parents and never left us feeling indebted. They made us feel that we contributed to the process.²⁴

Like so many Catholic missionaries who went to the South in the 1940s and '50s to help assist black people amid the tumultuous upheaval of racism and inequality, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration came to Canton sincerely seeking to help, and the students invited to Holy Child Jesus School were welcomed regardless of race, religion, or economic status. The future Sister Thea would later reflect:

The vast majority of the students were Baptist, Methodist, and Holiness. There were at most two dozen Catholics in a student population of 180. Holy Child was a good place to be.

We loved our teachers because they first loved us. For a handful, of Catholics, for devout Protestants, for the children of a surprising number of ministers, deacons, elders, and evangelizers, and for children who rarely went to any church, the Catholic school was a graced and grace-filled environment. We all went to Mass each week, sang in the choir, learned, if we wished, to serve Mass (boys only) or to care for vestments and altar (girls only). We all prayed before each class. We all studied catechism. With Father Gilbert [Hay] and Father Justin [Furman], religion class was a time to be anticipated and treasured—stories of Jesus and the saints, songs, and prayers, and Catholic doctrine. Our pastors loved us. They entertained us as they taught us. Some of my friends and schoolmates developed insights and skills (reading, thought, judgment, song), which enabled them to become young leaders in the Protestant churches in Canton.²⁵

Sister Thea was keenly aware of the conglomeration of children who comprised the student body of her elementary school as she recalled in a fundraising newsletter regarding her experiences as a child attending Holy Child Jesus School: “What an amalgam of children we were—some hungry; some afraid; some eager and inquisitive; some shy; far too behind ever to catch up academically; some far too old, even for sixth grade; most already discouraged with school and learning; some too poor to pay even the \$2 per month tuition that was asked but not required.”²⁶

The vital ministry of the Sisters at Holy Child Jesus School made a profound impact on the lives of the children of Canton. They received a challenging education that brought them to their grade-appropriate level of learning and were instilled with the desire to learn and achieve, as well as tenets of good citizenship, discipline, and Christian discipleship.

Students were assigned homework each day and were expected to have it completed. The students were proud of their school and did their part to make sure that the classrooms were clean and orderly.

The sisters who came to Canton were also concerned about the social well being of the black community. The sisters organized classes to teach nutrition and first aid to the impoverished community. They sought to help young pregnant women care for themselves during their pregnancy. They also organized a used clothing store known as the “sale house” or the “HCJ Emporium” and solicited donations to stock it from across the country.²⁷ This store was very important to the local community because struggling families and individuals could afford high quality clothes at bargain prices. The neat and fashionable clothing gave their new owners a sense of dignity and respect. The sisters were learning that sometimes the simplest thing, such as owning a pretty dress or a striking suit, would make an incredible difference in the lives of the black community.

While Bertha was attending Cameron Street public school, she had befriended a dear and lifelong friend, Doris Jones (later Doris O’Leary). Bertha was three years younger than Doris, but because she was an “old folks’ child,” she often had more in common with older children. Doris and Bertha became fast friends and enjoyed playing together, reading books, and singing songs. Dr. and Mrs. Bowman knew that being an only child was at times lonely for their daughter. When Bertha was eight years old and Doris was eleven, the Bowmans asked Doris’s father if Doris could come and live in their home as a playmate for their daughter Bertha. Doris’s mother had passed away some years earlier and as a widower left to care for his children by himself, he didn’t mind Doris going to live in the Bowman household. Doris O’Leary later

recalled, "Living with the Bowman family was very special. [Bertha] was like a sister to me and the Dr. and Mrs. Bowman treated me like I was their daughter. [Bertha] had two twin beds in her room that I shared with her. She had lots of toys but most of all she loved to read and had her own library in her room as a child. I never saw so many books in someone's home!"²⁸ When Doris moved in with the Bowsmans, she too, transferred from public school and the Bowsmans enrolled and paid for her to attend Holy Child Jesus School along with their daughter. Doris was not Catholic at the time but quickly converted as a child. She reflected, "The Franciscan Sisters were so nice to us, you just knew that they really cared for us. The sisters oversaw the Girl Scout troop. I became a Girl Scout and shortly after that I started going to catechism classes because of the fine example of the sisters. I was happy to become a Catholic." At home in the evenings, after she and Bertha finished their homework, they would go to their room and pray the rosary. "[Bertha] taught me how to pray the rosary," Doris remembered.²⁹

Doris O'Leary fondly remembers how Bertha loved to spend her free time as a child helping other children or assisting adults in need. She entertained herself as well as the other children by either reading or singing to them and putting on plays. "[Bertha] had a wonderful sense of humor and loved singing, dancing, and acting."³⁰

Besides both her prayerfulness and her playfulness, Doris recalled two other notable characteristics about young Bertha. "She was very smart; she enjoyed school and loved learning. [And] Bertha was the most generous person that I had ever met. Often, a fellow classmate who didn't have any food for lunch or who was still hungry, Bertha would quickly offer the student her lunch and would go without." Doris remembers that when she asked Bertha why she would

give away her lunch, “she would give me her big contagious smile and say, ‘That’s okay, I’ll be alright, and besides they needed my lunch more than I did.’”³¹ Eventually, Bertha had her mother making brown paper bag lunches filled with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and other goodies for the children in the school who didn’t have anything to eat. Bertha also convinced her mother to sew uniforms for the children whose parents could not afford to buy school uniforms. Bertha made sure that her mother completed the uniforms with the distinctive “HCJ” insignia.

Bertha loved spending time with the Franciscan Sisters. She and her good friend Flonzie Brown sought opportunities to visit the convent, and the sisters enjoyed their frequent visits. The seed of a religious vocation was planted very early in Bertha’s life, and she carefully nurtured it through prayer and by emulating the lives and practices of these Sisters from La Crosse. Bertha would “play nun” by putting a scarf on her head and pretending it was the veil of a religious habit, even when she would visit the convent, all to the amusement and encouragement of the Sisters.³² Bertha would often pray her rosary as the sisters prayed theirs, strolling the grounds of the Holy Child Jesus Mission. It was evident to the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Bertha’s childhood friends, fellow church members, and those in the community that “Birdie” would one day become a vowed religious sister. When Bertha was fourteen years old, she convinced Flonzie, then eleven, that they would both one day go to the convent and become Franciscan Sisters. But Bertha had failed to realize that her beloved friend Flonzie was not Catholic. Indeed, her family were longtime members of the local Church of God congregation. Decades later, Flonzie recalled gleefully telling her mother that she was going to be a Catholic nun, and her

mother without missing a beat responded, “Baby, I don’t think that’s going to happen.”³³ To say that her teachers, the good Catholic sisters from the north, enthralled Bertha would indubitably be an understatement.

Everyone else may have been convinced that Bertha would one day become a sister, but her parents were not. Not only did Dr. and Mrs. Bowman—the former then a Methodist and the latter then Episcopalian—not approve of their daughter considering the Catholic sisterhood, they outright objected. Naturally, the Bowmans had other dreams for their bright and outgoing daughter. Besides, they had hoped to have grandchildren. There were many long and difficult discussions with their teenage daughter about her perceived religious vocation. When Bertha’s parents ultimately forbade her to leave Canton to go to St. Rose High School located nine hundred miles away, at the motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin, they thought that was the end of the discussion.

In response, Bertha, ever determined to pursue her vocation, refused to eat. Doris O’Leary vividly recalls what she deemed her “hunger strike in order to go to the convent”: “She wouldn’t eat a thing and became so thin. Her poor parents were so troubled by her refusal to eat that they agreed to let her go to the convent.”³⁴ One can only imagine fifteen-year-old Bertha’s elation when her parents gave her their permission and somewhat reluctantly their blessing to travel so far away from home to answer her call.