

AN HOUR WITH THEA BOWMAN

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Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad) that “holiness...is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave your mark in this world.”

The Holy Father could well have been speaking of the life and holiness of Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA. While I never personally knew Sister Thea, since becoming bishop of the Diocese of Jackson in 2014, her spirit, mission, and impact are felt within our diocese and beyond. Sister Thea, confident in her God-given gifts and abilities, boldly proclaimed Jesus Christ and unleashed the gospel in ways that few can. As a missionary disciple, she evangelized and brought God’s unconditional love to those most in need of good news, especially the poor and marginalized. Her prophetic voice on behalf of racial solidarity and the integration of intercultural diversity are urgently needed in contemporary America.

Sister Thea’s inspiration, witness, and

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challenge are all signs of her unquestionable holiness. Her life and ministry radiated Jesus Christ. May Sister Thea's life and reflections inspire you to boldly evangelize as a missionary disciple.

*Most Reverend Joseph R. Kopacz, PhD,
Bishop of Jackson*

***Opening Prayer with
Sister Thea Bowman***

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***

Spiritual Biography

A self-proclaimed “old folks’ child,” Thea Bowman, named Bertha Elizabeth Bowman at birth, was the daughter of middle-aged parents, Dr. Theon Bowman, a physician, and Mary Esther Bowman, a teacher. She was born in 1937, and reared in Canton, MS. Wanting to give Thea a good education, they enrolled her at the Holy Child Jesus school. As a child, Thea converted to Catholicism as a result of the influence of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, who were her teachers and nurtured her faith.

Growing up, Thea listened to and learned from the wit and wisdom of the elders. Ever precocious, she would ask questions and seek new insights on how her elders lived, thrived, and survived. From family members and those in the community she learned coping mechanisms and survival

skills. She was exposed to the richness of the African American culture: the history, the stories, the music, the songs, the rituals, the prayers, the symbols, the foods, the customs, and the traditions. Moreover, she was cognizant that God was indeed the God of the poor and oppressed. Her community instructed her, “If you get, give—if you learn, teach.” She developed a deep and abiding love and faith in a God who would make “a way out of no way!”

For Thea Bowman, the decision to convert to Catholicism was also rooted in what she witnessed: She was drawn to the Catholic Church by the example of how Catholics showed love and care for one another, most especially the poor and needy. For Thea, religion was real and relevant. She saw people put their faith into action. In 1953, at age fifteen, she told her family and friends she wanted to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Thea left the familiar Mississippi terrain