



## WOMEN WITNESSES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

# Sister Thea Bowman



*Sister Thea Bowman*  
Artist: Chloe Becker, 2020

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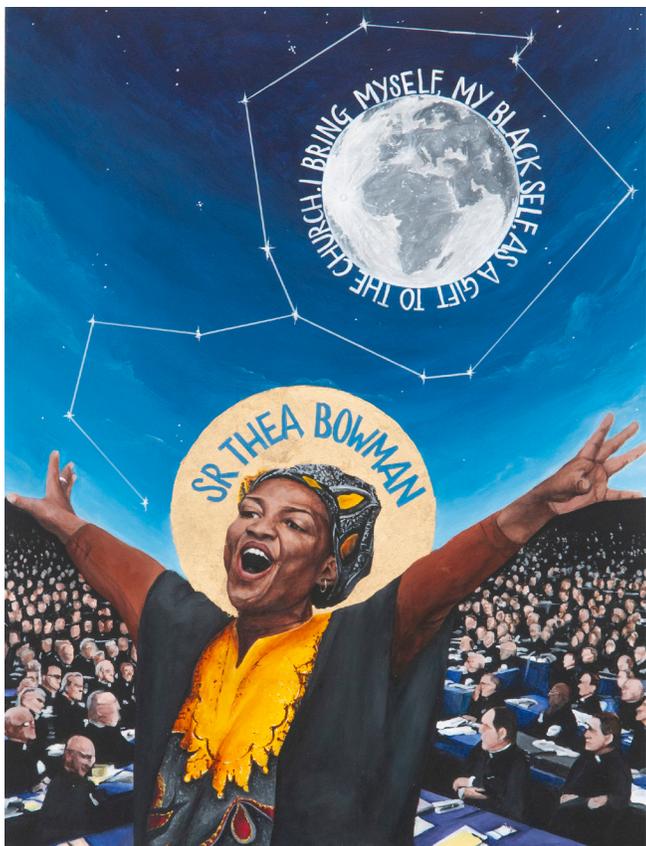


WOMEN WITNESSES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

## Sister Thea Bowman

Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, was an extraordinary woman, who, throughout her life, confronted racism and worked to desegregate every corner of her world. Throughout her life, she and her African American community faced white supremacy and racial injustices, and as an adult, she challenged the Church to see that all people, regardless of race or culture, could not only live and work together in harmony, but worship together as well. She taught us what it truly means to be a “catholic,” or universal, Church.

Bertha Bowman, known to us now as Thea Bowman, was born in 1937 in a small segregated community in the deep South to Mary Esther, a teacher, and Theon Edward Bowman, physician. Her parents were well respected in the Black community, but like all Blacks in the deep South, life was perilous in a world where white supremacy was vigilantly enforced in every aspect of daily life. Thea’s grandmother was a noble woman who had been enslaved and overturning the cruel legacy of slavery was very much a part of her unrelenting passion for racial justice.



*Sister Thea Bowman*  
Chloe Becker, 2020.

“What does it mean to be Black and Catholic? It means that I come to my Church fully functioning, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become.”

~Sr. Thea Bowman

Thea’s parents made their home in Canton, Mississippi, but when Mrs. Bowman was pregnant with her only child, they travelled to nearby Yazoo City because she would receive better medical care as a Black woman. Canton had no hospitals that would treat Black people and knowing the complications that could occur because of Mrs. Bowman’s age, Dr. Bowman wanted to make sure that his wife had the best medical care available to her.



While Dr. Bowman was esteemed as a physician in the Black community, that respect was not recognized by the white community. He and his medical degree were too often, scorned. Educated and having served in World War I, Dr. Bowman was treated with contempt by many in the white community, including other medical professionals.

The threats that white supremacists presented were constant and ubiquitous. As a young child, Thea and her family had a little white dog. When the dog ran out of the front door one day, Thea cried out in fear. Her mother quickly ran to get the dog fearing that it would pass over to the other side of the street-- the white side of the street.

## Education and segregation

Dr. and Mrs. Bowman wanted their daughter to have the best education possible.

As an adult, Thea Bowman wrote about her parents dedication to education.



*The day I was born, my father went out and started a separate bank account for my education. As far back as I can remember, education was a top priority in my family on both sides. My mother's mother was a teacher and a school principal. Even today, the school she founded in Greenville is still named after her. And, my father's father was a slave, but he managed to go to school through the second grade. So, the expectation was that education was important, not just for yourself, but for your family and your community. And it brought [the] responsibility to try to help somebody else. That's a different kind of*

*teaching from what many families believe today.*

Unfortunately, options were limited by state-mandated segregation. Thea was forced to go to the local public school from the first through fifth grade. The 1896 landmark case, Plessy v. Ferguson upheld educational inequality with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation was legal if facilities for whites and blacks were the same. Of course, the “separate but equal” clause was fraudulent evidenced by the stark imbalance between resources for white schools and black schools.

With so much poverty, social injustice, and educational inequality, Catholic leaders wanted to serve the needs of the people in Mississippi. Yet, there was an insufficient number of sisters, priests, and brothers to carry out the work - an insufficiency prompted by the actions and strong resistance of whites.. For instance, in 1920, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) tried to establish a seminary for Black Catholic men in Greenville, Mississippi, but their plans were halted by white agitators, some of whom belonged to the Klu Klux Klan. The SVDs were forced to relocate to a place that was more hospitable and finally, in 1934, the order ordained the

first four African Americans to the priesthood.

In order to build a workforce, the bishops of Mississippi welcomed help from outside the region

Women religious were sent to the region. In the 1940's, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration sent four of their members from Wisconsin into Mississippi to staff the new school, Holy Child Jesus. This gave Thea's

**Sr. Thea Bowman's feastday is celebrated on March 30th!**



parents a chance to enroll their daughter in a good school. Thea flourished in the new school, and she came to love the sisters who taught her. In her later years she understood how deeply they had impacted her life saying, “My friends and I were challenged every day to learn and help someone else ...We didn’t realize it, but we were learning to cooperate and to build our community.”

### Enrichment from the Catholic tradition

Of her religious training, Thea Bowman 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. They did not struggle to ask, ‘Did this Biblical event occur? When or how did it happen?’ Somehow they intuited that the stories were concerned with truth more than with factuality. They asked only, “What does this story mean? What did it mean in Biblical times? What does it mean in our lives today? What does it call me to do?”*

*Their teachings were simple. Their teachings were sound. Their methodologies were such that, without effort, I remember their teachings today: songs of Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Miriam, David, Dives, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jonah, John, Mary, Jesus: his birth, his life, his teachings, his miracles, his disciples, his Passion, his glory, his promise to us all of eternal life.*

With this rich background ever present in her life and because of her experience in the Catholic school, at the age of nine, Thea decided that she wanted to convert from the Methodism of her parents to Catholicism. This was no exchange of ideals, but an enrichment brought about by her many teachers and mentors.

Later, as a teenager, she made another decision. She announced to her parents her desire to join the community of the Franciscan sisters who had been her teachers and her mentors. But Thea’s parents did not agree to her plans. Like most parents, they wanted her to marry. They wanted grandchildren.

Her parents disapproval left Thea so distraught that she went on a hunger strike. She lost so much weight, that her parents finally relented and allowed her to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at the age of 15.

### Desegregating and enriching a white community

Joining the all white community and being the only Black Catholic woman there was not easy. The largely Irish and German community of women did not always appreciate Thea’s Black heritage, nor her love for music, dancing, and for singing. Her father, not wanting her to suffer wanted her to join a religious community of Black Catholic women. He begged her not to go when he learned she would travel to the all-white religious community in LaCrosse, Wisconsin to begin her novitiate. He warned her that she would not be liked. She responded to her father’s worry saying, “I am going to make them love me.”

Even though there were pressures to conform to the norms of the white community, Thea Bowman lived without compromise and carved out an authentic life. She had inherited the gift of song and a deep and abiding love for music from her mother and her community and she never disconnected herself from that cultural heritage. The old women and men who taught her the Black Sacred Songs that she would use to





inspire and challenge her listeners for nearly 30 years, became foundations for her demand that great respect be paid to the elders of our communities. What they did for her as a child, she called others to do for all children, everywhere.

## Sister Thea and the Civil Rights Movement

In 1959, as a young college student far from home, Thea Bowman wrote at length about her home as the Civil Rights movement was taking shape and building steam.

*Of the 18 states south of the Mason Dixon Line, I have visited only seven, and even in my home state, I have neither traveled nor observed extensively. But one little Deep South city I have known intimately and its people I have dearly loved. Of it and of them I shall tell you.*

*The place is Canton, a town of about 8,000, half of whose population is Negro.*

*Canton is an architectural conglomeration. Stately antebellum mansions of white Confederate descendants contrast sharply with ultramodern residences, neat bungalows and the small, dilapidated, almost uninhabitable dwellings of the very poor. Segregation is an invulnerable tradition. Whites have their streets and residential sections, as have the Negroes, and except for purposes of business, there is scant intercourse between the races. For this reason, the only people in Canton of whom I could hope to write are the Negroes. I lived across the road from white folks, shopped at their stores, passed them on the streets, but there was never a single southern white that I really knew...*

*What the white folks tell us is so much nonsense 'You can't have equal schools because you don't pay equal taxes. You don't pay equal taxes because you can't have equal jobs. You can't get paying jobs because you aren't educated, and if you are educated you're black, so what's the difference.' That's the vicious circle aspect of many a Cantonian Negro's existence. People who have not paying jobs, no matter how strong their backs, how lofty their ambitions, how sterling their ideals, cannot, simply cannot, better their conditions.*

*Many of the younger generation, really qualified to hold good positions and lead their people, become disgusted and leave the South for distant parts where they can work hard, rear their families without constant stress and live decent normal lives. Their desertion, which one can in no way censure, does nothing to better the Negro's position in Canton. My people need leaders, prudent, capable and strong. They are not clamoring for integration,*

*but they want equal rights-jobs, educational facilities, equitable public services. Those who are able join the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], giving financial support to their attempts to secure justice for our race. Some few complain, others pray, more simply wait.*

*Politically, we can do nothing. We cannot serve as senator, representative, jurist, policeman, constable or county clerk. Mississippi has granted Negroes the right to vote, but their voting is discouraged. I lived through the days when Senator Bilbo paraded up and down Main Street-his resolve to keep "niggers" away from the polls. I was not old enough to vote, but I am old enough to*

Remember  
who you are and  
whose you are.

Sister Thea Bowman



*remember the Bilbo cartoons that plagued our papers and my elders' conversations of deceit, trickery and violence used against Negroes at Mississippi polls.*

*Negro servants are always made to feel like servants. They are hired help. They use the servant's entrance, eat their meals alone, refrain from conversation with visitors, respond to requests with a little bow and a polite 'Yes, Ma'am,' do their work silently and well.*

*Most of my ancestors came to the Americas in chains, from thousands of towns and villages, from many racial stocks and many tribes—from the spirited Hansas, the gentle Mandingos, the creative Youlas, the Ibos, Efiks, Krus, the proud Fantirs, the warlike Ashantis, the Dahomeans, the Binis, and Sengealese. Some were captured in nature wars and sold to Europeans. Some were kidnapped. Some were sold into slavery for infractions of native laws.*

*They came to this hemisphere and met with the other side of my family— island dwellers from Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, and the Caribbean, French traders, and Native Americans with whom they mixed and married; Spanish conquistadors and Portuguese traders and owners and overlords who claimed their bodies as well as their labor.*

*In America, no matter what their percentage of Negroid blood, they were called sambos, niggers, nigras, colored, negroes, blacks, and this is what I am.*

*We came to North America as chattel labor—chained, stripped naked and examined, sold and branded. Having no property, owned, not owning, we were found everywhere, but chiefly in Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia,*

*those states where cotton was king.*

*We were valued because we were strong. We could work in un-shaded fields where noonday temperatures reached 140 degrees. We planted and harvested your cotton, cooked your food, washed your clothes, reared your children, built the antebellum mansions in which you take so much pride. Even after we were freed from slavery by law and fought your wars and helped to build your nation less than 15 years ago, many of us were, by law, denied equal opportunity, the right to equal education, even the right to vote.*



The turbulent 1960s was a period of transformation for a nation torn by racial strife and division. The United States was confronted by the quest for justice and racial equality for all Americans. The late 1960's was also a time of transformation for Sister Thea Bowman: both a spiritual and cultural awakening. The liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council encouraged Sister Thea to rediscover her African-American religious heritage and spirituality and to enter her beloved

Church “fully functioning.” She emphasized that cultural awareness had, as a prerequisite, intentional mutuality. She was eager to learn from other cultures, but also wanted to share the abundance of her African-American culture and spirituality. Indeed, Sister Thea became a highly acclaimed evangelizer, teacher, writer, and singer sharing the joy of the Gospel and her rich cultural heritage throughout the nation.

Throughout her life Sister Thea continued to assail racial prejudice and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity. She was a founding faculty member of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University



in New Orleans. She also helped establish the National Black Sisters Conference and advocated for an increased representation of African American people in Church leadership.

From the beginning of her teaching career until the end of her public ministry, music was the beautiful vehicle for Thea Bowman’s anti-racism witness to the world. Her enduring contribution to scholarship within the Roman Catholic Church and within the fields of Africana Studies, is her reliance on the wisdom and redemptive power of Black Sacred Song to teach, inspire, correct, challenge and transform all who would seek to “walk together” on *the journey from here to heaven*.

### Teaching our bishops and living fully to the end



**Sister Thea and her parents**

As her parents aged, Sister Thea went home to take care of them until they died. A few years later, she learned she had cancer. With the strength of her faith, she incorporated all the experiences in her life with eyes set on God.

Thea Bowman’s lived experience and vibrant, magnetic spirit shone most brightly through her song, her movement, and her words. The “spiritual power” of Black Sacred Songs was at the heart of Thea Bowman’s spirituality. As she said in the introduction to *Lead Me*,

*Guide Me*: “Black Sacred Song is designed to move. It moves because depth of feeling gives it spiritual power.”



**Sister Thea at USCCB**

At the time of her last great public performance - at the 1989 summer meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops - she began her remarks by singing, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” That song was her prophetic challenge to the rhetorical question,

“what does it mean to be Black and Catholic?”

Years earlier, in the landmark book she edited for those same bishops, she proclaimed her vision of the “beloved community” that drove her in all that she did. That book, *Families: Black and Catholic, Catholic and Black* (1985), she said: “assumes that the Black family is alive and well. It assumes further that we as a people need to find ways old and new to walk and talk together; to bond more surely; to extend family more widely and effectively, so that no one is fatherless, motherless, sisterless, or brotherless; so that no one lacks the life-sustaining human support of family.”

The music composed by Africans held in bondage contains sophisticated biblical commentaries, profound themes of “liberation” theology, and a system of mystical theology that have much to offer contemporary believers and seekers. Black Sacred Songs, composed in the fields, in the woods, and in the cabins of enslaved peoples, have been used by women and men all over the world in situations of oppression and abuse; in circumstances of



human alienation and longing. The songs speak of God's power being poured forth to lift up the lowly and bring them "way up in the middle of the air," where they can meet Jesus face to face, and spend time "walking all over God's heaven," finding release and respite for their tired and abused souls. The past, present and future achieve a mystical oneness during the singing of the songs. What bubbles up in the soul when these songs are correctly performed is this great truth: One must choose, every single day, to be free.

This was the witness of Thea Bowman, in formal and informal settings. Her teaching and her proclamations of the goodness of God were modern manifestations of the Magnificat of Mary. Sr. Thea would assume the persona of the simple, untutored "old soul" of the South, sharing homespun wisdom learned at the knee of the elders who nurtured her. She would make constant reference to "the old lady" or the "old gentleman" who seemed to always know that such wisdom is the ability to "speak truth to power." Sr. Thea used her music to break down barriers of race, culture, class and condition. The smallest child and oldest respondent became equals in the music that she urged them to sing. "Walk together, children; don't you get weary," became a mandate in the life of Thea Bowman. Lurking behind the performance of the songs and the spontaneous bondings of community that was often the result of a "Thea experience," was information carefully researched and refined by one of the most gifted intellects of the modern Catholic Church.

By making herself the humble "sister of everybody" within the sound of her voice, Sr. Thea was able to challenge social categories and political stereotypes with



a deftness that often went unnoticed until long after the audience had dispersed. She would often assert that she never preached. "I just tell the story of how good God has been to me; I don't preach," she would say. And yet she spent many summers teaching the principles of good preaching to women and men, both lay, religious and clerical during her time at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies.

The freedom she achieved as a woman who had seen the mountains, the valleys, the sunsets and the shadows of the journey laid out for all believers was a constant challenge to many.

She taught by her creative delivery, by her example, and by her astute powers of observation. For all of the folksy quality of her public performances, she was self-aware and intentional in her witness. "Catechesis must be rooted in the spirituality of the people and couched in the language they best understand," she would write.

For many people, the last years of Thea Bowman's life will be the most compelling, the most memorable. From 1984 when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer until her death on March 30, 1990, Thea Bowman's life was a gospel message of "living until you die." She lived, as fully and as purposefully as possible.

Just as it would be impossible to ignore her presence in the classroom, on the stage or at the pulpit during her active teaching ministry, it would be equally impossible to evade the reality of the change that took place in her life because of the encroachment of cancer. Illness - and death - were a part of life. During one of her last published interviews, Sr. Thea provided a distillation of



her vision of being truly in the hands of a good God: “I don’t try to make sense of [suffering]. I try to make sense of life. I try to keep myself open to people and to laughter and to love and to have faith. I try each day to see God’s will. I console myself with the old Negro spiritual: ‘Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world. I’m going home to live with God.’ “

Less than a year before her death, surrounded by friends and loved ones in her home church in Canton, Mississippi, Thea Bowman called a group of children to join her around her wheel chair, and she began to sing one of her songs. Her body and voice were tremendously weakened by radiation therapy, and her ability to speak - let alone sing - would have seemed to have been profoundly compromised. As she moved through the song, she changed the lyrics to suit the time, and she used her physical condition to teach a truth about the imperishable quality of “soul” that sustained her. She sang:

“Done made my vow to the Lord, And I never will turn back, Oh I will go, I shall go to see what the end will be.”

There is no end to her witness. There is no end to her story. There is only the voice, the words, the humor, the resilience. There is no turning back. She calls her friends, still, to stay “on the journey.” To be family.

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This essay contains material from an earlier FutureChurch essay on Sr. Thea’s life prepared by Joseph A. Brown, SJ, Professor and Director of the Black American Studies Program at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.



## Sister Thea Bowman's June 1989 Address to the U.S. Bishops Conference

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOV0n-QkjuoA>)

What does it mean to be Black in the Church in society?

I want to tell you about a Church.

(singing) *Sometimes I feel like a motherless child*

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child*

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child*

*A long way from home, a long way from my home.*

*Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air*

*Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air*

*Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air*

*Still I'm a long way, I'm a long way, I'm a long way.*

Can you hear me Church? Will you help me Church?

(singing) *I'm a long way from home, a long way from MY home.*

A pilgrim in the journey looking for home. And Jesus told me that the Church is my home. And Jesus told me that heaven is my home and I have here no lasting city. Cardinals, , bishops – my brothers or Church – please

help me to get home.

What does it mean to be Black in these United States?

What does it mean to be African-American?

Our history includes the services of Simon of Cyrene, the search of the Ethiopian Eunuch, the contributions of Black Egypt in art and mathematics and monasticism, and politics; the art and architecture of Zimbabwe, the scholarship of Timbuktu, the dignity and serenity of textile and gold and religion in Ghana, the pervasive spirituality and vitality of Nigeria, the political and social systems of Zaire.

Our history includes enslavements, oppression, and exploitation. As Malcolm X said it, "My folks, most of 'em didn't come over here on the Mayflower, they came over here on slave ships...in chains" – proud, strong men

and women – artists, teachers, healers, warriors, and dream-makers, inventors and builders, administrators, like yourselves; politicians, priests – they came to these shores in the slave trade. Those who survived the indignity of the Middle Passage came to the American continent bringing treasures of African heritage, African spiritual and cultural gifts – wisdom, faith and faithfulness, art and drama - here in an alien land African people clung to African ways of thinking, of proceeding, of understanding values, of celebrating life, of walking and talking and healing and learning and singing and praying. You saw it on the film - African ways of laughing and being together and loving. That's "culture".



**Sister Thea Bowman at the USCCB**



To the Americas our people brought the secret memory of Africa, the celebration of life values in an African way and style, in song and instrumentation, in story and drama, in verse and anecdote, the memory of the survival mechanisms of Africa. The memory of color and texture, of culinary arts that translated even when we ate chitlins and other folks' leftovers. African people here became African-Americans expressing faith in the God who loves and saves. They embodied and celebrated their own lives and their own values, their goals, their dreams, their relationships.

Our history includes the island experience – the Virgin Islands, Haiti, Cuba, our Hispanic experience in Central and South America, our native experience where African blood co-mingled with Chaka and Chickasaw and Cherokee, with people of Asian and Asian-Pacific origin, with Europeans from France and Germany.

You want to know why some of us look like we do? (laughter).

African people of the diaspora. We are here in this land and this is our land. That's part of our history too. Our people, black people, helped to build this Nation in cotton and grain and beans and vegetables and brick and mortar. They cleared the land and cooked the food that they grew. They cleaned houses and built churches – some of them Catholic churches. They built railroads and bridges and National monuments. Black people defended this Country as soldiers and sailors. Black people taught and molded and raised the children and I'm not just talkin' about the black children and if you don't believe me just ask that Cardinal sitting over there – some of y'all too, I'd imagine.

You know what I'm talkin' about Church?

I mean, are y'all walking with me Church?

Surviving our history physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, spiritually, faithfully, and joyfully – our people developed a culture that was African and American – that was formed and enriched by all that we experienced and, despite all of this, despite the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, and the socio-educational gains of the 70s – blacks in the 80s are still struggling – still “scratching and clawing” as the old-folks say – still trying to find home in the homeland and home in the Church. Still struggling to gain access to equal opportunity. A disproportionate number of black people are poor, poverty, deprivation, discrimination; stunt physical, intellectual and spiritual growth. I don't need to tell you this, but I want to remind you – more than a third of the black people living in the United States live in poverty – the kind of poverty that lacks basic necessities. I'm talkin' about old people who have worked hard all of their lives and don't have money for adequate food or shelter or medical care. I'm talkin' about children who can never have equal access and equal opportunity because poverty doomed them to low-birth rate and retardation and unequal opportunity for education. More than 55% of black babies are born to single mothers. About 41% of black families are single parent families headed by women. The divorce rate for blacks is twice as high as for whites. Black children are twice as likely as white children to be born prematurely – to suffer from low-birth rate, to live in substandard housing, to have no parent employed.

Unemployment and underemployment among us are endemic and many of us don't have the social and political context to put us where the jobs are when the jobs are being passed out.

One out of every 21 black males is murdered. A disproportionate number of our men are dying of suicide and AIDS and drug abuse, and low self-esteem.

What does it mean to be black and Catholic? For many



of us it means having been evangelized, having been educated, having been given a chance through the work in the Catholic Church, through the Josephites – the Devine Word fathers or the Holy Ghost fathers or the Franciscans, or the Yemenites, or the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. I’m from Mississippi – the first schools in Mississippi were started in the Cathedral basement by diocesan priests and a group of laywomen. For so many of us being black and Catholic means having come into the Church because education opened the door to evangelization.

It means, in an age when black men and black women were systematically kept out of the priesthood and out of most religious communities, there were those who cared and who came and who worked with us and for us and among us and helped us to help ourselves.

And now our Black-American bishops in the name of the Church universal have publicly declared that we as people of faith, as a Catholic people of God, have come of age and it is time for us to be evangelizers of ourselves.

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 traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility - as gifts to the Church.

I bring a spirituality that our Black-American bishops told us (they just told us what everybody who knew, knew), that spirituality is contemplative and biblical and holistic, bringing to religion a totality of mind

and imagination, of memory, of feeling and passion, and emotion and intensity. A faith that is embodied incarnate praise - a spirituality that knows how to find joy even in the time of sorrow – that steps out on faith that leans on the Lord. A spirituality that is commoner – that tries to walk and talk and work and pray and play together. Even when we’re busy, we’re busy around and we want to be find Him, where we want to reach out and touch Him. Where we can talk to Him. Don’t be too busy y’all. A spirituality that in the middle of your mass or in the middle of your sermon we just might have to shout out and say “Amen”, “Hallelujah”, “Thank you Jesus!”. (clapping)

A faith that attempts to be spirit-filled. The ol’ lady say, “That if you love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart and your whole soul, and your whole mind and all your strength then you praise the Lord with your whole heart and soul and mind and strength and you don’t bring him any feeble service. If you get enough fully functioning Black Catholics in your dioceses they’re going to hold up the priest and they’re going to hold up the bishop. We love our bishops y’all. We love y’all too but see these bishops are our own – ordained for the Church universal, ordained for the service of God’s people. But they ours - we raised them. They came from our community and in a unique way they can speak for us and to us. That’s what the Church is talkin’ about with indigenous leadership – the leaders are supposed to look like their folks. (laughter) Ain’t that what the Church says? (clapping)

To be Black and Catholic means to realize that the work of the ordained ministers is not a threat to me and I’m no threat to them. The work of the ordained minister, of the professional minister, is to enable the people of God to do the work of the Church. To feed us sacramentally – to enable us – to preach and to teach – and I ain’t necessarily talkin’ about preaching in the pulpit. You know as well as I do that some of the



best preaching does not go on in the pulpit but as a Catholic Christian I have a responsibility to preach and to teach – to worship and to pray – black folks can’t just come in the Church and depend on the preacher and say let father do it and if father don’t do it right and they walk out and they complain – “That liturgy didn’t do anything for me” – the question that we raise is “What did you do for the liturgy?” and the Church is calling us to be participatory and to be involved. The Church is calling us to feed and to clothe, and to shelter and to teach. Your job is to enable me, to enable God’s people – black people, white people, proud people, all the people – to do the work of the Church in the modern world. Teaching, preaching, witnessing, worshiping, serving, healing, and reconciling in black – because whether to the lived experience to the history and to the heritage of black people – getting in touch. To be Black and Catholic means to get in touch with the world’s Church – with my brothers and sisters in Rome – with my brothers and sisters in China – with my brothers and sisters in Europe and Asia, and Latin-America – with the Church of Africa.

Do you folks realize that there are more Catholic Christians in Africa than in North America and they run around talkin’ about the minority? (laughing). In African, right now 300 people become Christian every day and 75% of them are becoming Roman Catholic – The Vatican’s Central Office reports that in Africa the number of students for the priesthood increased by 88% between 1970 and 1988 – while in North America the number dropped by 43%.

To be Black and Catholic means to be intensely aware of the changing complexion of the College of Cardinals. I picked up your Catholic newspaper and I saw the picture Church – the World Church – a lot of folk look like me! (laughter).

We got to get the word out.

To be Black and Catholic still though often feels like being a second or third class citizen of the Holy City. You know, Bishop Jim Lyke said a long time ago that Black Catholic Christians will be second class citizens of the Church until they take their places in leadership beside their brothers and sisters of whatever race or national origin. Realizing that the documents Bishop Marino was talkin’ about, Brothers and Sisters to Us – that you wrote What We Have Seen and Heard have not been uniformly studied or implemented/integrated into life. Bishop Houck said one time that the Church has excellent documents, but no body reads them. I mean Bishop Howze – they both from Mississippi and sometimes I mix up the name (laughter). The majority of priests, religious and lay ministers who serve the black community in the United States still are not from the black community and many of those people who attempt to serve among us – some of them perhaps in your dioceses – do not feel an obligation to learn or understand black history or spirituality, or culture or life – black tradition or ritual. They work for the people, but they have not learned to share life and love and laughter with the people. They somehow insulate themselves from the real lives of the people because they don’t feel “comfortable” with black people. I travel all over the Country and I see it – black people within the Church – black priests – sometimes even black bishops who are invisible – and when I say that I

mean they’re not consulted. They are not included. Sometimes decisions are made that affect the black community for generations and they’re made in rooms by white people behind closed doors. Some of us are poor – some of us have not had the advantages of education, but how can people still have a voice and a role in the work of the Church. Isn’t that what the Church is calling us all to? I see people who are well educated and experienced, and willing to work – sometimes they’re religious, sometimes they’re lay – they’re not included in the initial stages of planning



– they’re not included in the decision making. Now I know y’all are bishops and I’m not talkin’ about somebody coming into your dioceses trying to tell you what to do – I’m talkin’ about the normal Church authorized consultative processes – that attempt to enable the people of God to be about the work of the Catholic Church. If you know what I’m talkin’ about say “Amen”.

Attendees: “Amen!”

See, the Church then – oh yeah, y’all talk about what do you have to if you goin’ to be a multi- cultured Church - sometimes I do things your way and sometimes you do things mine (laughter). Isn’t that how it is Archbishop ...yeah. (laughter and clapping).

Black people who are still victims within the Church of paternalism – of a patronizing attitude – black people who within the Church have developed a mission mentality – they don’t feel called –

they don’t feel responsible – they don’t do anything – you know, “Let Father do it – Let the sisters do it – Let the friends and benefactors from outside do it”. That’s the mission mentality and it kills us, and it kills our churches. And so, within the Church, how can we work together so that all of us have equal access to input – equal access to opportunity – equal access to participation – Go in the room and look around and see whose missing and send some of your folk out to call them in so that the Church can be what she claims to be – truly Catholic. They still talk about black folk in the Church – you hear it - you know you hear it over on the sideline – they say, “We lazy” - They say, “We loud” - they say “We irresponsible” - they say “We lowered the standards” – So often we’ve been denied the opportunities to learn and to practice. You learned by trial and error – ain’t that how you learned?

And to grow. Some black people don’t approve of black religious expression in Catholic liturgy. They’ve been told that it’s not properly Catholic. They’ve been told that it’s not appropriately serious or dignified or solemn or controlled – that the European way is necessarily the better way.

How can we teach all the people what it means to be Black and Catholic? The National Catechetical Director says that all Catechesis is supposed to be multi-cultural – but how little of it is. When we attempt to bring our blackism to the Church, the people who do not know us say that we are being “non-Catholic” or “Separatist” – or just plain “uncouth”.

I gotta say one more thing and y’all ain’t goin’ to like this but that’s alright. Catholic schools have been a primary instrument of evangelization within the black community. The Church has repeatedly asked black folk “What do you want?” – “What can the Church do for you?” and black folk all over the Country are saying, “Help us with education. We need education” and the way out of poverty is through education – the opportunity – we can’t be touched without education because ignorance cripples us and kills us. Black people are still asking the Catholic Church for education. Now sometimes we don’t have the money. Are we finding alternative ways to speak to the black community in a language that they understand?

Bishop Brunini said that a lot of Catholics spend time ministering to the saved and go out there and work with the Church folks. A lot of black people out there are un-churched. We have come a long way in faith. Just look at where we’ve come from. We as black people find ourselves at the threshold of a new age and as I look about the room I know that many of you have walked and talked – and worked and prayed – and stood with us in society and in the Church and in the name of all black folk, I thank you.



Today we're called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are and whose we aren't. If we, as a Church, walk together – don't let nobody separate you –

that's one thing black folk can teach you – don't let folks divide you up – you know, put the lay folk over here and the clergy over here – put the bishops in one room and the clergy in the other room – put the women over here and the men over here – The Church teaches us that the Church is a family of families and the family got to stay together and we know, that if we do stay together, come here brother – we know that if we do stay together – if we walk and talk and work and play and stand together in Jesus' name – we'll be who we say we are – truly Catholic and we shall overcome – overcome the poverty – overcome the loneliness – overcome the alienation and build together a Holy city, a new Jerusalem, a city set apart where they'll know that we are here because we love one another.

(singing) We shall overcome. Y'all get up.

(Sr. Thea and Attendees singing) - "We Shall Overcome" -

"We shall overcome, we shall overcome We shall overcome someday

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe We shall overcome someday"

Now bishops I'm goin' to ask you to do something – cross your left arm over your right arm – you got to move together to do that (laughter) – You got to move together to do that. All right now, walk with me – See – in the old days, you had to tighten up so that when the bullets would come – so that when the teargas would come – so that when the dogs would come – so that when the horses would come – so that when the tanks would come --- brothers and sisters would not

be separated from one another and you remember what they did with the clergy and the bishops in those old days where they put them? – Right up in front (laughter) – To lead the people in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Church who suffer in South Africa – who suffer in Poland – who suffer in Ireland – who suffer in Nicaragua – in Guatemala – in Northern Ireland – all over this world – We shall live in love.

(Sr. Thea and attendees singing to the tune of "We Shall Overcome")

We shall live in love. We shall live in love.

We shall live in love today.

Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe We shall live in love.

That's all we got to do – love the Lord and love our neighbors - (singing) "today"

Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen. (extended clapping and ovation)

In the name of all the mothers and grandmothers and aunts and sisters and friends – all the women who have brought you to priesthood – who have nurtured you toward episcopacy – who have strengthened you in faith and hope and love so that you can be the Church of Jesus Christ – I accept these beautiful roses. God Bless you always.

(Extended clapping and ovation)



**“I think the difference between me and some people is that I’m content to do my little bit. Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. But if each one would light a candle we’d have a tremendous light.”**

**“God is present in everything. In the universe in creation, in me and all that happens to me, in my brothers and sisters, in the church - everywhere.”**

**“I know that God is using me in ways beyond my comprehension.”**

**“Part of my approach to my illness is to say I want to choose life, I want to keep going, I want to live fully until I die.”**

## Reflection Questions

After reading the essay about Sister Thea Bowman’s life, what did you learn that was new? What challenged you? What gave you comfort? What do you take away?

About her life in her hometown of Canton, Sr. Thea wrote, “Politically, we can do nothing. We cannot serve as senator, representative, jurist, policeman, constable or county clerk. Mississippi has granted Negroes the right to vote, but their voting is discouraged. I lived through the days when Senator Bilbo paraded up and down Main Street-his resolve to keep “niggers” away from the polls. I was not old enough to vote, but I am old enough to remember the Bilbo cartoons that plagued our papers and my elders’ conversations of deceit, trickery and violence used against Negroes at Mississippi polls.”

How do you think Sr. Thea used this experience in her life’s work, in her song, in her mission of evangelization? What message would she offer today after the violence of white supremacists in the Capitol?

Sister Thea held the U.S. bishops spellbound as she addressed them in 1989. When asked to speak about what it meant to be Black and Catholic, she sang, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

What message was Sr. Thea conveying to the bishops? How do you think her message would be received today after the death of George Floyd and so many Black men and women in the United States?



## Ways to Take Action

From Fr. Bryan Massingale  
and Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

No lie can live forever.

Martin Luther King Jr.

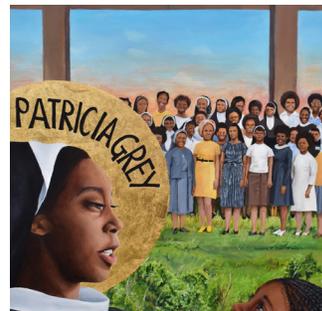
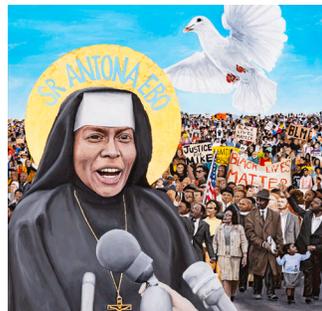
The denial of  
the dignity and sanctity  
of Black life  
is a part of the DNA  
of this country.  
It is also  
a foundational sin  
of the American  
Catholic Church.

Dr. Shannen Dee Williams

- **Admit your ignorance**, do something about it. **Confront your racism. Sit with the discomfort.** There is no way to tell the truth about race in this country without white people becoming uncomfortable.
- **Confront racism elsewhere** your family, friends, and colleagues courageously. Do not be silent. Until white people call out white people, there will always be safe places for racial ugliness.
- **Demand** that your parish and diocese sponsor a series on race. Tell your priests, religious educators, and ministers of the Word to make anti-racism a regular feature of their homilies and religious formation.
- **Contact your bishop** and ask how anti-racism is part of your church leaders' formation for ministry. Ask him to require the teaching of Black and Brown Catholic history in every Catholic educational institution.
- **Work for reparative justice.** Work to stop the closings of active African American parishes while reinvesting in and expanding the Black Catholic educational system.
- **Work in your community to protect Black lives,** eliminate racism in our systems, end mass incarceration, and secure police reform and accountability.



# Witnessing for Racial Justice Prayer Service



## INTRODUCTORY RITES

*Opening Song:*            Let Justice Roll Like a River            M. Haugen

*Refrain:*            Let justice roll like a river, and wash all oppression away;  
                           Come, O God, and take us, move and shake us,  
                           Come now and make us anew, that we might live justly like you.

### *Sign of Cross and Greeting:*

*Leader:*            We gather in the name (making the sign of the cross)  
                           of our Loving Creator, in whose divine image we are all made;  
                           of our Christ our Liberator, who leads us to fullness of life;  
                           And of the Holy Spirit of courage and boldness,  
                           who journeys with us today and always...

*All:*                    Amen.

*Leader:*            The unshakable peace of Jesus, the boundless love of God,  
                           and the power of the Holy Spirit is with you,

*All:*                    And also with you.



*Introductory Remarks:*

Leader: Church, we gather to lift up the life, witness, and legacy of Sr. Thea Bowman, Servant of God.

As we enter into this time together, I call to mind the words of Dr. King as he, a prophet himself, reflected on the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures in 1966. He said:

When silence threatens to take the power of decision out of our hands ... one looks into history for the courage to speak...Looming as ethical giants are the Hebrew prophets.

They did not believe that conscience is a still, small voice. They believed that conscience thunders or it does not speak at all. They were articulate, passionate, and fearless, attacking injustice and corruption whether the guilty be kings or their own unrepentant people. Without physical protection, scornful of risks evoked by their unpopular messages, they went among the people with no shield other than truth.

Today we particularly need the Hebrew prophets because they taught that to love God was to love justice; that each human being has an inescapable obligation to denounce evil and to defy a ruler who commands [them] to break the covenant.

The Hebrew prophets are needed today because decent people must be imbued with the courage to speak the truth, to realize that silence may temporarily preserve status or security but to live with a lie is a gross affront to God.

The Hebrew prophets are needed today because we need their flaming courage; we need them because the thunder of their fearless voices is the only sound stronger than the blasts of bombs and clamor of war hysteria...

Sr. Thea Bowman is one such prophet, whose voice still thunders as powerfully, as fearlessly, as beautifully today as it always did – whether in her song, in her preaching, or in her teaching.

And so, we pray: (allow for a brief moment of silent centering)

*Opening Prayer:* from <https://www.sistertheabowman.com/prayer/>

Leader: Ever loving God,  
by your infinite goodness  
you inflamed the heart of your servant and religious,  
Sister Thea Bowman with an ardent love for you and the People of God;  
a love expressed through her indomitable spirit,



deep and abiding faith, dedicated teaching, exuberant singing,  
and unwavering witnessing of the joy of the Gospel.

Her prophetic witness continues to inspire us to share the Good News  
with those whom we encounter; most especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.

May Sister Thea's life and legacy compel us to walk together,  
to pray together, and to remain together as missionary disciples.

Gracious God,  
imbue us with the grace and perseverance that you gave your servant,  
Sister Thea.

For in turbulent times of racial injustice,  
she sought equity, peace, and reconciliation.

In times of intolerance and ignorance,  
she brought wisdom, awareness, unity, and charity.

In times of pain, sickness, and suffering,  
she taught us how to live fully until called home to the land of promise.

We pray in the name of Christ Jesus,  
your Word made flesh and born of a woman –  
who lives and thrives with you, with us all,  
in unity with the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and forever.

All: Amen.

### *LITURGY OF THE WORD*

#### *1st Reading:*

Reader: A reading from the first book of the prophet Samuel:

Samuel was sleeping in the temple  
where the ark of God was.  
God called to Samuel, who answered, "Here I am."



Samuel ran to Eli and said, “Here I am. You called me.”  
“I did not call you,” Eli said. “Go back to sleep.”  
So he went back to sleep.

Again God called Samuel, who rose and went to Eli.  
“Here I am,” he said. “You called me.”  
But Eli answered, “I did not call you, my child. Go back to sleep.”  
At that time Samuel was not familiar with God,  
because God had not revealed anything to him as yet.

God called Samuel again, for the third time.  
Getting up and going to Eli, he said, “Here I am. You called me.”

Then Eli understood that God was calling the youth.  
So he said to Samuel, “Go to sleep, and if you are called, reply,  
Speak, O God, for your servant is listening.”

When Samuel went to sleep in his place,  
God came and revealed the Divine presence,  
calling out as before, “Samuel, Samuel!”  
Samuel answered, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Samuel grew up, and God was with him,  
not permitting any word of his to be without effect.

The Word of our God

All: Thanks be to God

2nd Reading: From the testament of Sister Thea Bowman to the U.S. Bishops  
(Can also be presented as Video -- 11:50 – 21:05 <https://youtu.be/uOV0nQkjuoA?t=710> )

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 traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility - as gifts to the Church.



I bring a spirituality that ... is contemplative and biblical and holistic, bringing to religion a totality of mind and imagination, of memory, of feeling and passion, and emotion and intensity. A faith that is embodied incarnate praise - a spirituality that knows how to find joy even in the time of sorrow – that steps out on faith that leans on the Lord. A spirituality that is commoner – that tries to walk and talk and work and pray and play together...A spirituality that in the middle of your mass or in the middle of your sermon we just might have to shout out and say “Amen”, “Hallelujah”, “Thank you Jesus!”.

To be Black and Catholic still though often feels like being a second or third class citizen of the Holy City. You know, Bishop Jim Lyke said a long time ago that Black Catholic Christians will be second class citizens of the Church until they take their places in leadership beside their brothers and sisters of whatever race or national origin. ...

The majority of priests, religious and lay ministers who serve the black community in the United States still are not from the black community and many of those people who attempt to serve among us – some of them perhaps in your dioceses – do not feel an obligation to learn or understand black history or spirituality, or culture or life – black tradition or ritual. They work for the people, but they have not learned to share life and love and laughter with the people. They somehow insulate themselves from the real lives of the people because they don't feel “comfortable” with black people.

I travel all over the Country and I see it – black people within the Church – black priests – sometimes even black bishops who are invisible – and when I say that I mean they're not consulted. They are not included. Sometimes decisions are made that affect the black community for generations and they're made in rooms by white people behind closed doors. Some of us are poor – some of us have not had the advantages of education, but how can people still have a voice and a role in the work of the Church. Isn't that what the Church is calling us all to? I see people who are well educated and experienced, and willing to work – sometimes they're religious, sometimes they're lay – they're not included in the initial stages of planning – they're not included in the decision making. Now I know y'all are bishops and I'm not talkin' about somebody coming into your dioceses trying to tell you what to do – I'm talkin' about the normal Church authorized consultative processes – that attempt to enable the people of God to be about the work of the Catholic Church. If you know what I'm talkin' about say “Amen”.

The Word of our God

All: Thanks be to God

Leader: As we listen to the second and third reading, we will begin and respond by singing the African American Spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” which Sr. Thea used so powerfully to call the



US bishops to attention and account as she began her historic address.

*Sung Response:* Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child Traditional Spiritual

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,  
A long way from home, a long way from my home.

The Second Reading from the Witness of Fr. Bryan Massingale (<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/01/06/us-capitol-trump-riot-racist-239662>)

As I watch the unimaginable scenes of insurrection from our nation's capitol, where our entire Congress was held hostage by the actions of a deluded and deranged mob, I am filled with anger. Righteous anger. Because while what we are watching is horrifying, it is not surprising.

What we saw today is a clear declaration that many white people would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy. If democracy means sharing power with people of color, especially Black people, then they want no part of it. Today is the inevitable consequence of the nation's tolerance of white racism.

Here is where the wisdom of the Catholic moral tradition is achingly relevant. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that one shares in the evil of another "by omitting the counsel that would have hindered the wrongdoing" and by "silence, by not preventing, by not denouncing."

What we witnessed in Washington is a direct consequence of four years of enabling complicity, cynical appeasement and cowardly silence. It is also the consequence of the complicit silence and active support of religious leaders who refused to confront the cancer of white nationalism that this president endorses and who excused all manner of his wrongdoing, incompetence and brutality by saying these were not the "pre-eminent evil" that should determine a Catholic's vote.

St. Pope John Paul II declared, "Truth is the mother, basis, and foundation of justice." What we saw today is the consequence when truth is ignored, trampled and dismissed. And when lies are repeated, winked at or cynically embraced. We cannot have justice when charade passes for reality, when racist delusion is passed by in silence, when political cynicism passes for public service.

The fundamental question confronting the nation is: Will we strive to be a nation of liberty and justice for all? Or only for some? For those who are white and angry? For those who look like and pray like us? Until we face those questions, we dare not act surprised by the horror that we saw at the Capitol today. Or when it happens



again.

### *Sung Response*

*The Third Reading* from Olga Segura (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/ncr-connections/catholic-church-must-reject-its-anti-black-misogyny>)

It is not just our president who can fuel racial hate.

There is an abyss in our church, and it is because the bishops, collectively, and, by extension, other leaders in the church are not listening to the true needs and desires of marginalized communities. A bridge is needed...for the Catholic Church, where a true, Christ-centered love of justice is missing, a community led by men who often form incorrect opinions rooted in misogyny and who seem to ignore the cries of the Black faithful.

Anti-black misogyny has existed in our church and nation since the days of enslavement. To eradicate this system, our bishops must authentically and collectively engage with and accompany movements that are challenging Catholics to envision a faith centered outside of whiteness.

It is organizers, from groups like Black Lives Matter, the Dream Defenders, the Sunrise Movement and Black Youth Project 100 — many founded and/or led by citizens from marginalized communities — who are inspiring citizens to fight toward dismantling oppressive systems, fighting for Black life and dignity, and standing in solidarity with one another.

Until we do so, our church leaders will continue to provide a disservice to the faithful who are struggling to understand what role their faith plays in the movement for Black lives.

### *Sung Response*

*Reflection* (3 - 5 minutes) This can be done as a quiet meditation or as a exchange between participants

Leader: As we take a moment to reflect silently, I ask you to consider:

- What did you learn? - About Sr. Thea Bowman? About the Black Catholic experience?
- What touched or moved you? - In Sr. Thea's presentation? In Kim Harris' or Kayla August's witness?
- How will you change? - In your personal life? In your engagement with institutions or communities you are a part of? In your understanding of what it means to be Catholic?

### *Prayers of the Faithful*



Leader: We lift up our prayers in confidence, assured of God's love for us and knowing that we stand united with that great cloud of witnesses – all holy women and men and particularly our Black Catholic Saints – who intercede for us. Our response is: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

For the Church, that we may truly live as One Body – united in Christ – and work together to rid ourselves of racism and white supremacy, and all forms of exclusion and discrimination, we pray: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

For the citizens and leaders of the global community: that inspired by the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we may enact policies that uphold the dignity and equality of all people, that ensure a sustainable and equitable distribution of our resources, and advance the common good we pray: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

For an end to systemic racism: that we may reform and rebuild all of our institutions – policing, education, healthcare, housing, politics, and economics - with justice and love as our guide. And for reconciliation and reparation for centuries of violence and oppression against People of Color, we pray: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

For us gathered here: that we may honestly seek to understand ourselves and others as well as the ways we benefit from privilege and power, that we may be allies who confront bias and prejudice in ourselves and one other, we pray: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

For marginalized Catholics – and particularly young Catholic women of color – that they may be emboldened by the witness of Sr. Thea Bowman to embrace their wholeness, to lift up their voices, and to claim their rightful place in our midst as they seek to respond faithfully to God's call in their lives, we pray: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

For all who are ill and for those who have died (brief pause). For those most vulnerable to the coronavirus and for our health care and essential workers. We pray: Let justice roll like a river, O God.

Loving God of all, we stand before you in need of your mercy and compassion. Come to our aid. Make haste to help us. We pray in the name of Christ, our Liberator, AMEN.

## *CLOSING RITES*

### Closing Prayer

Leader: Our closing prayer is taken from the conclusion of Sr. Thea's address to the US Bishops. May her hope become our prayer:



Today we're called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are and whose we aren't.

If we, as a Church, walk together– if we walk and talk and work and play and stand together in Jesus' name – we'll be who we say we are – truly Catholic and we shall overcome – overcome the poverty – overcome the loneliness – overcome the alienation and build together a Holy city, a new Jerusalem, a city set apart where they'll know that we are here because we love one another.  
AMEN.

*Closing Song* We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome.  
we shall overcome.  
We shall overcome someday.  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe  
We shall overcome someday.

We shall live in love.  
We shall live in love.  
We shall live in love today.  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe  
We shall live in love today.

The truth will make us free.  
the truth will make us free.  
The truth will make us free some day.  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,  
The truth will make us free someday.





## Artist's Statement Chloe Becker, 2020

First and foremost, it was important for me to feel Sr. Thea's energy through this portrait.

I wanted to show her as she spent most of her time on earth: lively, joyful, singing, teaching, and preaching her truth as a Black Catholic woman.

She is lighting up the cool night sky with her warmth, and preaching to the United States Bishops as she did famously in 1989. I chose to add in a larger crowd than just the bishops to convey that Sr. Thea taught the entire white Catholic community what it means to genuinely live out one's faith, and even more so, the urgent need to dismantle racism in the Catholic Church and United States.

The constellation and moon display in a divine way what she is preaching: "I bring myself, my Black self, as a gift to the Church."

-Sr. Thea Bowman