

SR. THEA BOWMAN

Sister Thea Bowman (Bertha Elizabeth Bowman) was born December 29, 1937, in Yazoo City, Mississippi, the daughter of a doctor (father) and a teacher (mother). Her grandfather had been a slave. Even though Sister Thea was raised in a Methodist home, her parents sent her to a Catholic school. At the age of nine, with her parents' permission, Sister Thea became Catholic. Six years later, she joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Wisconsin — over her parents' objections.

Sister Thea earned degrees in English at Viterbo University (La Crosse) and at Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C.). For 16 years, she taught at the elementary and secondary levels in Wisconsin and Mississippi, and then at Viterbo College, Catholic University of America, and Xavier University (New Orleans), where she was instrumental in helping create the University's Institute of Black Catholic Studies. The bishop of Jackson, Mississippi invited her to become the Diocese's consultant for intercultural awareness, a position in which she presented nationally and used the gospel message combined with singing and storytelling to help break down racial and cultural barriers. Sister Thea is known for her impact in the Civil Rights Movement and for providing a foundation in liturgy for the distinct worship of Black Catholics. She also was instrumental in the publication of the hymnal "Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal."

In 1984, Sister Thea was diagnosed with breast cancer, and her prayer became "to live until I die." She continued her justice and reconciliation work until she died in 1989. The Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, in 2018, declared Sr. Thea a "servant of God," which is the first step in the process of becoming a recognized saint in the Catholic Church.