The mysticism of Thea Bowman

As I studied Christian mystics, I kept wondering where the Black women were. Then I discovered Sister Thea.

by Angela R. Hooks in the March 2025 issue
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Sister Thea Bowman sings during a 1986 visit to St. Augustine Catholic Church in Washington, DC. (Photo by Michael Hoyt / *The Catholic Standard* [newspaper of The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, DC])

As a seminarian taking classes in church history, spirituality and mission formation, and women of the Reformation, I learned a key fact about mysticism: from Christianity's triumph in the fourth century up to the 18th century, mysticism was associated with women. In the 12th century, Hildegard of Bingen had prophetic visions and struggled with God's call for her to "write down that which you see and hear," but in the end she did write down what she saw "in heavenly places." In the 13th century, Mechthild of Magdeburg received her first "greeting" from the Holy Spirit at age 12, and at 23 she left her family to live an obscure life as a Beguine. Her mysticism was marked by erotic imagery of divine love and marriage. Catherine of Siena's 14th-century life was an example of mysticism in action: she aided the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned.

I was intrigued to learn about Hildegard, Mechthild, Catherine, Julian of Norwich, and Teresa of Ávila. These are the women mystics most Christians with an interest in the topic can recall by name. But as I studied the history of Christian mysticism, I kept wondering to myself, where were the Black women?

In my own research, I discovered that the life of Thea Bowman mirrors those of the great Christian mystics. Sister Thea, née Bertha Elizabeth Bowman, heard God's call at a young age and became a Catholic sister—the first African American member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Rather than cloister herself in a convent, Bowman lived as an active contemplative, fighting for racial and social justice. She endured enormous personal suffering while continuing to serve her community and church.

Preaching around the world in traditional African dress, Bowman challenged the Catholic Church to accept her as "fully black and fully Catholic." After her death 35 years ago this month, the church took up the cause for her canonization as a saint. I'm convinced that Christians should number her among the great women mystics of our tradition.

Born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, to college-educated Protestant parents and raised in nearby Canton, Bowman converted to Catholicism when she was nine years old and heard the call to be a sister at 14. When her parents objected to this plan, she went

on a hunger strike. Eventually, as she grew thinner and thinner, they relented.

Bowman's conversion had been inspired by four White FSPA sisters who taught Black students at a school they ran in Canton during segregation. The State of Mississippi unjustly and unequally allocated funds to Black schools, but Holy Child Jesus School did not discriminate on race, class, or religion. "Holy Child was a good place to be," said Bowman, according to her biographer Maurice Nutt. We loved our teachers because they first loved us. The Catholic school was a graced and grace-filled environment." Bowman understood that the school had brought hope and a sense of dignity and pride to the Black and poor of Canton.

As a contemplative, Bowman prayed. As an activist, she registered Black voters and assisted with medical care and fundraising.

It was not the liturgy or church teaching that drew Bowman to Catholicism; it was the personal witness of the priests, sisters, and laypeople at school. Bridget Mary Meehan quotes her saying that she "wanted to be part of that effort to help feed the hungry, find shelter for the homeless, and teach the children." But her spiritual development remained grounded in the spiritual life of African Americans—the mystical traditions, the communal experience of prayer and worship, and the music.

Bowman knew that "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," as she wrote in the songbook *Songs of My People*. She notes that "many of the best teachers were not formally educated. But they knew Scripture, and they believed the Living Word must be celebrated and shared." From the African American elder community, she saw that "there was joy in serving the Lord and that joy permeated one's whole being."

She also knew the importance of serving with her own community of Catholics. "Everybody needs family," she writes in *Families: Black and Catholic, Catholic and Black*:

> We start with a basic human need for family and for one another. We realize that one father, one mother are not enough: that families need the support of other families, and so we seek ways of bonding, nourishing, and healing. We become community when families share values and needs....

The love that makes us community also makes us truly Church.

But while the sisters in Canton knew Bowman deserved her place in the religious community, she had to prove her worthiness to the sisters at St. Rose Convent in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where she would take her vows. Her father warned her: “They’re not going to like you up there, the only black in the middle of all the whites.” She responded: “I’m going to make them like me.”

Bowman understood the importance of returning love for hate. “Hate eats into my heart and eats into my soul,” she said. To her, being a loving person didn’t mean taking abuse but did mean trying to have “an understanding heart.” Later she said in an interview, “I’m from Mississippi, and the people who did not learn to contain their anger and frustration did not live long.”

Bowman drew on those lessons to adjust to convent life in Wisconsin. Freezing and thawing snow. Unfamiliar food. Racist remarks about her hair, her skin, her people, and her culture. For the young, energetic, Spirit-filled teen, swaying, sashaying, dancing, or breaking into song to soothe her soul was no longer an option. She tried to fit in, repressing her spontaneity and humor. She adhered to the convent’s stringent rules—sleeping in a dormitory in a bed enclosed in white curtains, praying in the formal manner. “If I was cold . . . I would just be cold. If I was hungry, I would just be hungry,” she said.

In the convent, Bowman also endured serious illness. When she tested positive for tuberculosis, she remained “determined to be a Catholic sister no matter what it takes.” Over ten months in River Pines Sanatorium, Bowman penned letters and took correspondence courses so she wouldn’t fall behind on her coursework. She remained loving and kind, encouraging other patients and making friends. A sanatorium bulletin reported, “Just walk into room 303. There, you will find a bright girl who can do almost anything. If it’s an ache or pain you’re advertising, she has a prescription.”

In 1958, Bowman entered the novitiate class and professed her first vows. She went to Viterbo College (now Viterbo University), the FSPA’s school in La Crosse, where she studied Latin and music and sang in the convent choir and schola cantorum. The sisters took note of her abilities and groomed her for the teaching profession.

She was first assigned to Blessed Sacrament Catholic School, an affluent, all-White parish in La Crosse, to teach fifth and sixth graders. The parents flinched at the

notion of a Black teacher instructing their children. But Bowman's warmth and charm eventually put them at ease. "I wasn't glad that I was there, but I felt deep in my heart that God had me; I felt he had a reason for calling me, and I had to wait on the Lord and be of good courage," she said in an interview. "The children liked me, and because the children liked me, parents accepted me."

Two years later, Bowman was sent to her childhood school, Holy Child Jesus School back in Canton. Bowman's return to Mississippi in 1961 made waves in the White community, where people objected to a Black sister living and traveling with White sisters. On her way into town she would duck down in the car so she wouldn't be seen.

Bowman returned home in the midst of the civil rights movement with a sense of desperation and urgency. At school she taught English and music, but she also wanted the Black children of Canton to believe, with unwavering conviction, "I am somebody; I am special." She instructed the students to point to themselves and say, "Repeat after me: Black is beautiful. I am beautiful." In an interview with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes*, she explained that the gesture means "caring, and [having] respect for myself, and confidence. And then you have to believe it."

When civil rights protesters marched in the streets of Canton, Bowman's religious vows forbade her from joining them. When one of the sisters suggested they break the rules, Bowman replied, "I've made my vows to the Lord, and I will not turn back." As a contemplative, she prayed; as an activist, she helped with voter registration in the Black community and assisted with medical care and fundraising. Meanwhile she lifted the spirits of unenthusiastic high schoolers with Black sacred songs that she called "a living repository of the thoughts, feelings, and will of Black spirituality." She said, "Black music lifts up the lives we lived and live."

After completing her doctorate in English at the Catholic University of America, Bowman emerged as a public speaker who told the truth about discrimination against Black Catholics. She began to travel on behalf of the church, preaching and singing. "Somebody like me, a teacher of the English language and literature, was made to be a ministerial and troubadour going around the countryside, teaching the good news, singing, and praising," she said. "I come to be with you as myself. I don't apologize for being myself in situations where people are not comfortable with who I am. I try to be careful though because I don't want to alienate you."

At the request of her bishop in Mississippi, Bowman developed diocesan outreach programs to non-White communities. She helped establish the Black Catholic Theological Symposium and served as faculty for the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. Although not ordained, she taught priests, Black and White, how to preach the gospel. “I tried to get them to work with their body with techniques of relaxation, communication, and rhythm of expression from the Black church,” she told Wallace.

Bowman infused Black sacred songs into liturgical worship, conventions, workshops, eucharistic celebrations, and classrooms as a means of liturgical justice. She taught that “each spiritual is in its own way a prayer—of yearning or celebration, of praise, petition or contemplation, a simple lifting of heart, mind, voice, and life to God.” She recorded *Songs of My People* and compiled a new hymnal, *Lead Me, Guide Me*, directed to the Black Catholic community.

In 1984, the same year she lost both her parents, Bowman was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Pressed against the precipice of unknowing, she vowed to “live fully until I die”—though in surrendering to God’s will she was unsure whether to pray for healing, life, or death. Lying in her bed, staring into the camera of an interviewer, she said, “Life and death was a cycle of reality, and that plan was part of God’s plan, and it was good.”

In the last six years of her life she still managed to make 100 appearances worldwide, fervently preaching the Black Catholic gospel. While receiving chemotherapy, she traveled to the Virgin Islands, Nairobi, Kenya, Nigeria, Hawaii, and Kenya on behalf of the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi.

Sitting in a wheelchair onstage in 1989 at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, Bowman delivered a historic speech to the US Catholic bishops about Black suffering and hopes, contributions and needs, history and future, and faith in the US Catholic Church. At her instruction, the room full of White men stood, crossed their arms, clasped hands, and joined her in singing, “We Shall Overcome.”

“The Black Catholic gospel is when something is wrong, and you change it,” she said. “You make doers out of observers.”

Sister Thea Bowman is remembered as an influential teacher and activist, and she will likely be canonized as a Catholic saint.

She’s not the only Black Christian woman who should be included in our conversations about the history of mysticism. In my research I have also studied the spiritual autobiographies and religious, political, and social activism of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Maria Stewart, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Julia A. J. Foote. Each wrestled with the inner struggles of God’s call on her salvation life. Each underwent suffering and illness. Their spiritual autobiographies narrated mystical experiences such as ecstatic dreams, visions, and the demonstration of spiritual power and extraordinary gifts associated with the Holy Spirit.

Like Bowman, these women experienced the direct and transformative presence of God, and they shaped the direction of American Christianity. They also studied, practiced, and applied the ritual and cultural mindset and the spirit of Black Christianity. They were scholars who led contemplative lives. They were also public theologians and activists who traveled across the country and world. With voice and body, they offered a prophetic critique challenging the governing structures and institutions regarding redemption, social and gender inclusivity, and justice. They deserve to be remembered as mystics.