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Review – Charlene Smith, F.S.P.S. and John Feister, *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*

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BOOK REVIEWS

THEA'S SONG: THE LIFE OF THEA BOWMAN by *Charlene Smith, F.S.P.A. and John Feister*. Pp. xvi + 319. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. 2009. \$28.00. ISBN: 978-1570758683 (paper).

Thea's Song is clearly a labor of love. The authors, one a member of her religious order, write in meticulous detail about the life and early death of this woman whom so many called friend and mentor. Their access to Sr. Thea's family, school, and religious order records enabled them to develop and present a picture of this intense and vivacious woman's contributions to her Church and to the world around her.

The work begins with the birth of Bertha Bowman, a long awaited child. Named after her aunt Bertha, Sr. Thea admits to having never really liked the name and used her nickname of "Birdie" more frequently until she chose the name of Thea (of God) at her first profession of vows. Born into a family that was both Episcopalian (mother) and Methodist (father), she was immediately exposed to cross-denominational life in the church, something that was a common part of life in the Black community of the 1950's and '60's. She was the daughter of a medical doctor (father) and teacher (mother) so was from infancy primed to succeed in whatever task she or others set for her.

The book goes into significant detail on Thea's early life, her introduction to Catholicism as a result of attending Holy Child Jesus School in her hometown of Canton, Mississippi; her introduction as well to what it meant to be a person of African ancestry in the pre-Civil Rights South. We follow her from birth through elementary school and witness her conversion experience as it propels her to leave all that she knows and loves in the Black Canton community

to journey to the cold, predominantly white town of Lacrosse, Wisconsin where she takes up the role of aspirant to the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She is the first African American woman to enter the order. In learning of her journey, we learn also of the journey of other African American women, who were also firsts in their respective communities. Their experiences reveal sadly that racism was not just a sickness external to the Catholic Church but was very much a part of it. For Bertha, soon to be Sr. Thea, this was a challenge. She was firmly convinced of God's love for her and all of humanity and saw no room for bias of any kind either in or outside of her church. This was an issue she challenged for the rest of her life.

Thea's rapid progress towards profession in the F.S.P.A.s was temporarily sidelined by a case of tuberculosis. Her indomitable spirit and optimistic outlook enabled her to persevere despite almost a year of imposed rest in a sanatorium. Returning to her studies, both religious and secular, she forged ahead into college and the postulancy. While working on her BA degree, Thea, like her sisters, also taught in the elementary school run by the F.S.P.A.'s. Her eagerness and love of learning soon converted all of her students and their parents as well, who were at first shocked and somewhat uncertain about a black religious. Their doubts were quickly removed and she became one of the most popular teachers at the school.

After her first profession, she was able to return home to Canton to teach at her alma mater and taught there for a number of years while spending summers first at Viterbo College and then at the Catholic University of America where, in 1972, she earned a Doctorate in English. Even there, her love of singing and dance, which had been somewhat stifled but never stilled during her early years in the F.S.P.A. manifested themselves as well as her wealth of knowledge about Black literature and music. She was asked to create and teach a course in Black literature, the first of its kind at Catholic University.

The authors ably lay out the trajectory of Thea's life post achieving her doctorate and discuss the way in which she was able to challenge the Catholic Church in all of its members (Bishops to laity) for its failures to live up to its own teachings on social justice. Sr. Thea was a founding member of the National Black Catholic Sisters Conference and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University. She was a much sought-after speaker on issues and concerns of the Black Catholic community and the Black community as a whole as well as a world-renowned lecturer on multiculturalism, Black literature and Black music. The author lays out the trajectory of this shooting star, who blazed into life in 1937 and, too soon, blazed out again in 1990. But in the course of the 50+ years of her life, Bertha (now Sr. Thea) Bowman had a profound impact on the world around her. Taught from birth that nothing was too impossible for her to achieve, she passed that message on to everyone with whom she came into contact. Despite the rigors and pain of treatments for the cancer that ravaged her body, she continued to speak the truth to her people and challenged them to do likewise.

This book reveals the person behind the name, a woman determined to speak out on her faith regardless of the obstacles others attempted to put in her path. It leads us on an incredible and exciting journey through the life of this remarkable woman, challenging us to take up the staff of leadership that she once carried. The book enlightens, inspires, goads and moves the reader as we are amazed over and over by this woman who was an ardent worker in God's vineyard. At her death, she was acclaimed internationally and nationally as a true servant of God who "lived until she died" and whose legacy continues to live on in all of us.

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