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NEWS

The U.S. has no Black Catholic saints. Could a future one be buried in Memphis?

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She wore African dress, began by singing, preached on what it meant to be Black and Catholic in America — and Sister Thea Bowman ended her 1989 speech to the U.S. Catholic Bishops by convincing the bishops to stand and sing with her.

“They always say that was her first miracle. She got the bishops to dance,” said Sister Charlene Smith, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration who was friends with Bowman for 35 years.

There are currently no Black U.S. saints in the Catholic Church, although six are being considered for canonization.

Bowman is one of those six, and if she’s canonized, a Black Catholic saint known for her radiant personality and her advocacy for racial reconciliation will be buried in Memphis, less than three hours from her childhood home in Canton, Mississippi.

In 2018, Bowman was declared a “Servant of God,” the title given to a candidate for sainthood whose cause is still under investigation, prior to being declared “Venerable.”

Born in 1937 in Canton, Mississippi, to a physician and a teacher, Bertha Elizabeth Bowman converted to Catholicism at nine years old after being taught by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity.

At 15 years old she told her parents she wanted to go to Wisconsin to join the Franciscan Sisters — and started a hunger strike when her parents told her she wasn’t going. She won the argument, and soon became the first Black member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

It was there that she met Smith, who entered the convent about the same time. Both wanted to be teachers and majored in English, taking classes together. Today, Smith has written a

book about Bowman.

Entering religious life, Bowman was given the name “Sister Mary Thea” in honor of the Virgin Mary and Bowman’s father, Theon Bowman.

Embracing 'Blackness and Catholicism as gifts from God'

Later, Bowman would work as a teacher, becoming “a highly acclaimed evangelizer, teacher, writer, and singer sharing the joy of the Gospel and her rich cultural heritage throughout the nation,” according to a biography at her cause for canonization website.

In 1978, Bowman received the position of director of the Office of Intercultural Affairs for the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, where she “continued to assail racial prejudice and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity,” according to the biography.

“Sister Thea’s legacy would be she equipped Black Catholics with knowledge of their history, culture and spirituality of African Americans within the Catholic Church,” said the Rev. Maurice Nutt, redemptorist priest in the Diocese of New Orleans, who was charged with researching Bowman’s life in the cause for canonization. “She encouraged us to own our own ancestry and heritage and to bring that as gifts to the Catholic Church, that the Catholic Church could not be complete without our presence. That’s what makes the Catholic Church truly universal. We came as people bringing gifts to the church so the church might be totally whole and complete.”

A former student of Bowman, Nutt knew her for the last six years of her life and has also written a book about her.

Bowman traveled the country, delivering public lectures as a critic of racism and an advocate for the full inclusion of Black Catholics in the church.

She often interspersed her talks with singing, with a voice “like an angel,” said Smith.

She also was excellent with children, Smith said, sometimes telling them to look at their hands: “You have five fingers and there are five different colors of skin,” Bowman would tell the children. “There’s black and there’s brown and there’s yellow and there’s red and there’s white, just remember we are all one family.”

Her favorite song was “This Little Light of Mine.” She had her own light, but also “had the uncanny ability to see the light in the souls of everybody she met,” Smith said.

In 1984, Bowman was diagnosed with breast cancer. She continued to speak, arriving in a wheelchair and dressed in customary African clothing until her death in Canton in 1990.

Smith said she considers it “one of the greatest treasures of my life” that she was able to spend time in Bowman’s orbit.

Although Bowman had never lived in Memphis, her uncle moved to the south side of the city to work as a pharmacist and purchased a plot at Elmwood Cemetery. Both of Bowman’s parents were buried there, so she was laid to rest next to them. On her tombstone are the words she requested: “She tried.”

“Sr. The Bowman was a spiritual mystic, civil rights activist, teacher and preacher among us,” said Therese Wilson Favors, who worked on Black Catholic initiatives with Bowman. “She raised our souls to a richer level of spiritual ascension and called us to embrace our Blackness and Catholicism as gifts from God. This dance of cultural and spiritual awakening was refreshing and appealing to Black Catholics. Sr. Thea challenged us to be authentically Black and Catholic and called the Church to celebrate this diversity as (a) gift.”

A contemporary Black Catholic saint?

Today, there’s an effort out of Baltimore to have an expedited canonization process for Bowman and the five other Black U.S. Catholics currently being considered for canonization.

The reason, said Ralph Moore, a member of the social justice committee at St. Ann’s Catholic Church in Baltimore, is because there are currently no Black U.S. Catholic Saints.

“We’ve remained faithful despite the history of enslavement and mass incarceration and mass poverty,” Moore said. “But as you sit in a Catholic Church and look up, you don’t see anything that looks like us. It’s all white. And that’s the way it’s always been.”

The church’s social justice committee has organized a letter writing campaign to Pope Francis, urging immediate canonization.

Of the six Black U.S. Catholics currently being considered for canonization, only Bowman is considered a contemporary, since she died in 1990. That means many people today knew her.

Delores Moore (no relation to Ralph Moore), another member of St. Ann’s social justice committee, met Bowman at a Black Catholic revival in Baltimore shortly before Bowman’s death. Although her cancer had progressed, Bowman was “so enthusiastic,” she said.

“She lifted our spirits,” Delores Moore said. “She challenged you. She was just an exciting human being to be with. You just couldn’t keep the word to yourself. You had to put it in action. She really challenged us as Catholics.”

Bowman told Black Americans that they could be both good Catholics and Black at the same time, Ralph Moore said.

She showed that they could embrace Black preaching and Gospel music in the Catholic Church and be “free and expressive,” he said.

“She was a larger than life figure and the great benefit for those of us around today is that we could see what a saint looked like,” he said. “Not a person who walked with tiny steps and whispered, but a person who lived out loud and who moved people by the force of her personality and the force of her spirit.”

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