

## Sr. Thea Bowman, gifted educator, dies



AP/Wide World Photos

### Seeking refuge

Scores of people were injured when 40,000 illegal Chinese immigrants — in hopes of receiving residency rights — stormed a dog track in Macao on Thursday, March 29.

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Sister Thea Bowman, the valiant, frail educator, evangelist and gospel singer who often moved audiences to tears of joy with her message of black giftedness, died of bone cancer March 30 at her home in Canton, Miss. She was 52.

"She was one of the most remarkable women of our time," said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph A. Francis of Newark, N.J., a longtime friend.

Although she struggled with debilitating bone cancer since 1984, Sister Bowman — a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration for more than 30 years — continued to give lectures and workshops. She drew capacity crowds wherever she went.

When she spoke about black Catholicism, her message was always essentially the one she gave last August at a national meeting of black Catholics in Atlanta: "We are called to share our gift of blackness with the church."

Although she was most noted for her lectures and workshops on black Catholic culture and life, she was also a gifted liturgist, singer, writer on spirituality, teacher and artist.

Bone cancer and chemotherapy had so weakened her that in her final two years she had to speak from a wheelchair and often had to rest for hours before and after a talk.

Shivering and exhausted beneath several layers of blankets after a stirring talk last June to a national meeting of the U.S.

bishops in South Orange, N.J., she told reporters that "pain is a constant." But she quickly added, quoting from an old spiritual, "I keep so busy serving my master, I ain't got time to die."

In recent years she has been showered with awards and honors — the latest was the University of Notre Dame's prestigious Laetare Medal, announced the Sunday before her death — and plans are under way for a book and movie on her life.

Bishop Francis, in a telephone interview following her death, said that in her life "Thea's great moment was when she spoke to us (the nation's bishops), when she got us to sing and hold hands, when she challenged us and, at the end, reminded us to be grateful for the wonderful women in our lives."

He added that she was able "to be a feminist without being an antagonist."

At the meeting, she sang an old Negro spiritual which, she told the bishops, expresses what it is like to be black and Catholic in the U.S. church today: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child ... Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air."

"She never doubted that God was the wind under her wings," Bishop Francis commented. "She could fly anywhere. But she was the wind under the wings of so many of us."

Sister Bowman closed her talk to the bishops by having them stand together, link arms and join her in singing, "We

Shall Overcome." As the bishops swayed together to the music, many fought back tears and some wept openly.

Bishop Francis said her impact on the church, society and black Catholics was always "very positive."

"She lived within society and the church," he said. "She never blamed the institution. Instead she used her talents to better the institution, to challenge the institution."

He said another high point of her life was speaking at the National Black Catholic Congress held in Washington in 1987, the first such meeting in nearly 100 years.

"She was one of the great leaders to bring us to that moment," he said.

He called the congress "the culmination of years of self-awareness" of black Catholics. "Thea Bowman's presence there was a great moment. She was in so many ways a part of" the whole movement that led to the congress, he said.

Born in Yazoo City, Miss., Dec. 29, 1937, Bertha Bowman — she became Thea when she took vows as a Franciscan — was the granddaughter of a slave, but both her parents had college degrees. Her father was a physician and her mother was a teacher.

She converted to Catholicism in her early teens after her parents sent her to Holy Child Jesus High School, then recently opened in Canton by the Wisconsin-based Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

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