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## Leaders

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Father Abram. Sister Bowman was born in Yazoo City, Miss., and was baptized a Catholic when she was 10 by her own choice. She entered the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in 1953, having attended the local school the nuns opened for black children. Father Abram was born in Buffalo, attended Catholic schools, and made his first profession in 1962.

According to friends, the two literally wore themselves out in their careers, traveling and often working together to promote freely-expressed black Catholicism as well as the Institute of Black Catholic Studies, which they'd helped found in 1980 at Xavier University, the country's only black Catholic university, in New Orleans.

Father Joseph A. Brown, SJ, worked with them at the institute. He wrote the 1997 book *Dobson* uses for her programs, *A Retreat with Thea Bowman and Bede Abram: Leaning On the Lord*. It was done at the request of St. Anthony Messenger Press.

"Their work was to teach people wherever they found them," he said of the two, "to give permission to pray, think and worship in (black) culturally-appropriate ways.

"Thea and Bede would have been quite clear, this is a choice and you have the right to choose. That had not been said before," Father Brown said in an interview from Carbondale, Ill., where he is director of the Black American Studies program at Southern Illinois University.

"The Institute of Black Studies was not designed for a black constituency, so they trained a lot of white nuns and priests," he explained. These nuns and priests then discovered how to preach in the black cultural style — a style they too could use.

"In classrooms, from stages, at the altar and at the pulpit ... Thea Bowman and Bede Abram were singing and dancing 'canticles of praise.' The love and affection they shared with each other spilled over, forming a community among those who gathered around them," he wrote.

Father Abram's style was the essence of black theology, Father Brown wrote: "confrontational, sudden and irresistible."

Students and acquaintances recall how the priest and nun sang, moaned and howled as they told stories of black ancestors — stories they thought the church had not taught well.

In fact, the Franciscan sisters were often uncomfortable with their young nun, Father Brown said. "The more Thea became 'black,' the harder it was for her community to deal with her."

She also went from wearing the traditional habit to colorful African gowns that flowed and moved with her as she taught young people to dance and sing African

cultural religion.

"I can't go to a white church anymore, personally. It's boring," said Father Bruce Schultz, OP, editor of *Sacred Rock*, the journal for black Catholic studies at Xavier. "I think you have to experience (Sister Bowman and Father Abram). They were multimedia presentations. They sang, shouted, danced, pontificated, they were wise. They leapt for joy and moaned in sorrow. A printed page really doesn't do them justice."

Both can be experienced live in video form, however. For instance, the Catholic Communications Campaign with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration issued, "Sr. Thea: Her Own Story" in 1991.

In that video, Sister Bowman said, "I began to try to show folk that it's fun to reach out across the customary barriers and boundaries of race and culture to get to know somebody else and to try to be friends with somebody else, so that we can work to make this world a better place for all of us."

Father Noel Danielewicz, OFM Conv., of St. Francis of Assisi Church, Bessemer, Ala., explained how black expression in the American Catholic Church changed thanks largely to people like Sister Bowman and Father Abram.

"Before their time we wouldn't have had the hymnal *Lead Me, Guide Me*, the first Catholic American black hymnal," he said. Add to that black artwork, vestments, preaching style, thinking pattern, African liturgical dance, drums, piano — "Those are the things that weren't there before," he said. The church's rich heritage of such black saints as Cyrene, Simon, Augustine and Monica is much more acknowledged, he said, thanks to the fact Sister Bowman and Father Abram told their stories in their preaching and teaching.

His parish school now offers scholarships, one in Father Abram's and one in Sister Bowman's name, for students selecting Catholic secondary education, Father Danielewicz noted.

## Lives are 'shooting stars'

Both Fathers Danielewicz and Brown bemoaned the early loss of Father Abram and Sister Bowman. Father Brown, 54, said he considers their deaths warning signs.

"We have lost an alarmingly high percentage of black Catholic leadership before the age of 60," he said, noting that Archbishop James Lyke of Atlanta, Auxiliary Bishop Carl Fisher of Los Angeles, Auxiliary Bishop Emerson Moore of New York, liturgical musician Leon Roberts, catechist Nathan Jones and others had died in the past several years. Father Brown said he urges colleagues when they gather to take greater care of themselves, to adopt healthier lifestyles, to learn to lessen their stress, to shun smoking and abuse of alcohol.

"We need young people who want to

minister," said Ra Riddick, pastoral associate at Immaculate Conception Church in the Diocese of Jackson, Miss. "I would have thought Thea's legacy would encourage more.

"She spoke about being a sister to everybody ... She truly loved people of every color, starting with her own. Yet she was a target of racism inside and outside the church. ... I am often sanguine and angry. I learn from her to focus and put things back in focus."

He added, "Personally, I have asked her intercession for a number of things." Once, while working in Harlem, he borrowed one of her hair braids, which admirers saved from the days before her cancer treatments.

"Basically, it's a relic," he said.

Sister Charlene Smith, FSPA secretary general, from La Crosse, Wis., acknowledged that the black community in particular has expressed hopes for Sister Bowman's beatification.

"We've done a lot of research," she said of her order, explaining that conference calls were made to Sister Bowman's acquaintances across the country in 1995. "First of all, we've got to get miracles. People have such devotion to Thea already."

Although the order is not spearheading the canonization process, she said, "We are supporting canonization."

But, she acknowledged, "So many feel Thea would not want us to do all this canonization stuff." Sister Bowman might want the money spent on the poor and education instead, she explained.

Sister Smith added that almost every day some correspondence crosses her desk about Sister Bowman. Schools, clinics, programs and buildings are being named for the late nun. A new Cincinnati church will feature her in its artwork along with Dorothy Day, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dr. Tom Dooly and Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton.

"She's in pretty good company, don't you think?" Sister Smith commented. Also, the FSPA convent in La Crosse features a room for Sister Bowman's many honors, papers, tapes and African style gowns, she noted. And the order plans to reprint by June the 1993 book *Sister Thea Bowman, Shooting Star: Selected Writings and Speeches*, edited by Sister Celestine Cephess, FSPA.

The title comes from Sister Bowman telling a priest to say at her funeral what Sojourner Truth once said: "I'm not going to die. I'm going home like a shooting star."

In *Shooting Star* Sister Bowman was quoted as saying that her pastor had suggested joining an order of black women. And her father had warned her that she would not be liked as the only black in the Franciscan community. But she'd responded, "I'm going to make them like me."

## Did you know?

The Office of Black Ministries of the Diocese of Rochester estimates there are 2,000 to 4,000 practicing and nonpracticing black Catholics in the diocese. Statistics from the national Secretariat for African American Catholics cite:

- 2.3 million African American Catholics
- 1,300 African American Catholic parishes
- 14 African American Catholic bishops, including five diocesan bishops
- 75 African American pastors
- 500 African American Catholic priests
- 500 African American Catholic sisters
- 400 African American Catholic deacons
- 71 offices of African American Catholic ministry
- Four African American heads of religious communities

Father Brown said that Sister Bowman had moments of "profound sadness" because of a lack of understanding and sensitivity for her and her culture. However, he added, "She wasn't letting it out for public consumption."

Sister Smith, who today serves on the board of the Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation, joined the order around the time Sister Bowman did. Both majored in speech, English and drama, she said, and later kept in touch throughout their careers.

One summer at Viterbo College both novices were practicing makeup and costuming for a theatrical course.

"We both had on white veils. She made me up as a black and I made her up as a white person. She was a gorgeous white woman. I did all right as a black woman, too. I tell this at practically every speech I give, it was part of my beginning of understanding," Sister Smith recalled.

Having spent the day as their transformed selves, Sister Bowman told her, "Now you know what it feels like, Charlene."

"She was one of the most empathic people I've known," Sister Smith said. "... I miss her, although she is always over my shoulder, laughing. She sang a lot, too. She sang joy."

*St. Bridget's Church will host the next "Retreat with Sister Thea and Father Bede," at 7 p.m. March 1 and 8. Also, Dobson will present a message portraying Sister Bowman at the 10:30 a.m. Mass Feb. 28 at St. Bridget's.*

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